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THE LOGIC OF THE LUDICROUS:

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF HUMOUR

submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis represents an attempt to show how recent research in pragmatic theory can contribute to our understanding of humour. Two inferential theories have been selected: speech act theory and relevance theory. In addition, I have looked at the modification of the speech act model proposed by Leech.

An exposition of each theory is followed by an account of how these theories can be applied to humour. Some research into humour has already been carried out using the speech act model. This is described and evaluated. For Leech's extension of that model, and for the relevance-theoretic model, there is virtually no existing research on which to draw. Consequently, both the application of these theories to humour, and their evaluation thereof, are my own.

Speech act accounts of humour are based on the notion that humorous utterances are unconventional and unpredictable. One way of exploiting our expectations, and thereby creating a comic effect, it is argued, is to violate the norms of conversation (that is to say, Grice's maxims and Searle's conditions). This analysis is found to be insufficient, on its own, to distinguish between the humorous and the non-humorous utterance. I will show how the unpredictable, unconventional remark can be used to

create a number of different effects, some humorous, some non-humorous. Maxim violation is thus seen to be inadequate, both as a descriptive and as an explanatory tool.

Relevance theory constitutes a radical departure from the whole maxim-based framework. Adopting this approach to the analysis of verbal humour, I will try to find out exactly what is going on in our minds when we interpret humorously intended utterances. I will identify the various processes which I believe are employed in the appreciation of verbal jokes, and will conclude that these processes are not unique to humour. In spite of this, I will claim that there is a sense in which verbal humour can be said to be unique.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Brief historical overview

The study of humour has traditionally been seen as a sub-part of the study of aesthetics, and as such has been of interest primarily to philosophers (see, for example, Edwards, 1967). The first of the Greek philosophers known to have considered the nature of humour and laughter was Plato. He believed that the absurd was based on an unfortunate lack of self-knowledge, claiming in Philebus that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are experiencing a combination of both delight and envy, that is, we mix together both pain and pleasure (Plato, 1861). We know also that Aristotle considered the nature of the ludicrous in (the lost second book of) Poetics. Scant references to comedy in the first, and only extant, volume tell us that, in common with Plato, he saw the ridiculous as something rather ugly and distorted (Aristotle, 1934).

For Kant humour stemmed from some kind of frustrated expectation, that is, a bringing together of two things that are normally kept in separate compartments in our minds:

"Humour, in a good sense, means the talent for being able to put oneself at will into a certain frame of mind in which everything is estimated on lines that go quite off the beaten track (a topsy turvy view of things), and yet on lines that follow certain principles, rational in the case of such a mental temperament." (Kant, 1952: 203)

Schopenhauer saw the essence of humour as the creation of an incongruity between a concept and the real object:

"The intentionally ludicrous is the joke. It is the effort to bring about a discrepancy between the conceptions of another and the reality by disarranging one of the two."

(Schopenhauer, 1909: 281)

Kant and Schopenhauer were among the first to espouse an approach which came to be known as incongruity theory. Other incongruity theorists include Beattie (1776), a Scottish philosopher and contemporary of Kant; Maier (1932); Eastman (1937); Monro (1951); and Koestler (1964).

In contrast, Hobbes subscribed to the superiority theory of humour, regarding laughter as the result of a sudden feeling of superiority over others:

"... the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." (Hobbes, 1962: 46)

Bergson, whose book Laughter is probably the best known work on humour by a philosopher, also held a version of the superiority theory (Bergson, 1911). For him, laughter is always at "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson, *ibid*: 37). Thus, for Bergson, the archetypal comic character is a man with a fixed idea. Bergson's thinking is quite strongly influenced by the comic characters created by Moliere, but he does occasionally illustrate his ideas with other examples. Take, for instance, the following, which features a group of men obsessed with protocol:

"Twenty years ago, a large steamer was wrecked off the coast at Dieppe. With considerable difficulty some of the passengers were rescued in a boat. A few custom-house officers, who had courageously rushed to their assistance, began by asking them 'if they had anything to declare'." (Bergson, *ibid*: 46)

Other theorists who adhered to some version of the superiority model include Carpenter (1922); Ludovici (1932); Leacock (1935); and Rapp (1951).

The rise of psychology, and in particular of psychoanalysis, led to the development of the third, and last, major type of humour theory. It is known as relief theory and its most influential exponent was Freud (Freud, 1976). Relief theory is based on the view that we laugh when we are released from the constraints imposed on us by society. Other exponents of relief theory include Freud's teacher, Lipps (1898); Kline (1907); Spencer (1911); Gregory (1924).

These approaches to humour are by no means mutually exclusive, but to help us understand something of the essential differences between them, consider the following exchange.

(1) Diner: What's this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Looks like the breast stroke, sir.

For proponents of the incongruity theory, the waiter's reply is humorous because it is unexpected and inappropriate. A more recent version of this theory, known as incongruity-resolution theory, holds that, to be comic, the incongruity has to be rendered congruous, or meaningful in some way (Schultz, 1972; Suls, 1972). In (1) the waiter's reply is incongruous because it is an unexpected response to the diner's question. However, if we spot the ambiguity, we can reanalyse the diner's utterance and this will render meaningful and in some sense more appropriate the waiter's reply.

For proponents of the superiority, or disparagement theory, we laugh because we feel superior to the waiter, who is stupid enough to think that the diner really wanted to know how the fly in his soup was managing to stay afloat, or to the diner, who has failed to make himself understood. Some superiority theorists believe that laughter is a healthy, relatively harmless, outlet for human aggression, since it replaces physical attacks on one's opponents, while others believe that, on the contrary, any form of victimisation or ridicule is wrong.

Lastly, relief theorists argue that we laugh at (1) when we are no longer bound by the linguistic constraint of univocality, that is, by the requirement that one utterance has one, and only one, meaning. In addition to this, we laugh because we are liberated from our inhibitions, which derive from the socially instilled requirement that we suppress our feelings of mirth at the waiter's misunderstanding (note 1).

These theories are still around today in some form or another, although it is the incongruity theorists who have arguably attracted the most disciples (see, for example, Rothbart, 1976; Schultz, 1976; Nerhardt, 1976, 1977; Suls, 1972, 1983; Navon, 1988; Morreall, 1983, 1987, 1989). Moreover, with the burgeoning of the social sciences, the study of humour has extended beyond the confines of philosophy and psychology to become a multidisciplinary field of enquiry, of interest to sociologists (e.g. Fine, 1983; Mulkay, 1988; Davies, 1990);

anthropologists (e.g. Douglas, 1968; Johnson, 1975, 1976, 1978; Apte, 1985); semioticians (e.g. Milner, 1972; Boussiac, 1977); literary theorists (e.g. Hurst, 1987; Chard-Hutchinson, 1991); ethnographers (e.g. Sherzer, 1978); health professionals (e.g. Robinson, 1991); linguists (e.g. Hockett, 1977; Pepicello and Weisberg, 1983; Raskin, 1985); and pragmatists (e.g. Wilson and Sperber, 1988). I have decided to place this study within the framework of pragmatic, as opposed to linguistic, theory. The reason for this will become clear when we consider the nature of these two disciplines, and the nature of humour itself.

1.2. Linguistics and humour

Raskin is arguably the first, and most influential, linguist to have developed a comprehensive theory of humour, based on his own semantic theory (Raskin, 1985). Although ostensibly working within a Chomskyan framework, Raskin's approach is in fact at odds with one of the basic tenets of Chomskyan linguistics. I'll explain.

For Chomsky (1986), the central goal of linguistics is the study of I-language, where language is seen as a system, an internalised set of rules or principles. This system is an abstract construct, which can be studied independently of the use to which it is put. Although knowledge of the system is vitally important in verbal communication, it is woefully inadequate when

it comes to explaining how language is used and understood in concrete situations. Thus an important distinction has developed between semantics, which forms part of our grammar or I-language (and is thus a branch of linguistics), and pragmatics, which deals with our ability to convey and interpret verbal messages. Put briefly, semantics has to do with sentence meaning, i.e. the semantic representation of sentences, while pragmatics has to do with speaker meaning, i.e. the interpretation of utterances in context. (For discussion of the semantics/pragmatics distinction, see, for example, Smith and Wilson, 1979, Chapters 7 and 8; Leech, 1981, Chapter 16; Lyons, 1981, Chapter 5; Blakemore, 1987, Chapter 1.)

We don't have to think long about the nature of humour before we come to the conclusion that it must be approached within the framework of pragmatic, rather than semantic, theory. The main reason for this is quite simple. I will quote Ziv and Gadish on the subject. "Intentional humor", they claim, "is created by people to be enjoyed by people. This humor can be conceptualized as a form of communication As with any communication, humor implies three elements: a communicator, a listener, and a message" (Ziv and Gadish, 1989: 760). In other words, humour is not a property of sentences but of utterances, and as such it depends for its existence on a context. Semantics, which only deals with sentences, cannot begin to give an account of a phenomenon which falls so completely outside its domain.

Raskin's stand on this issue is both confused and confusing. He acknowledges the importance of context in the creation of humour, and incorporates into his theory the notions of implicature, presupposition and entailment. Anyone familiar with these categories will know that they come from pragmatics, and in fact, on reading Raskin's analysis, one soon reaches the conclusion that his approach is not semantic, but pragmatic, in nature. Raskin's mistake, then, lies more in his blurring of the semantics-pragmatics distinction than in any fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of humour in relation to language and communication. We will return to Raskin's analysis later on, when we have considered the nature of the discipline which does look as though it might be of some use to us, namely pragmatics.

1.3. Communication theory and humour

If we accept the basic premise that intentional humour involves communication, then we might reasonably expect a theory of communication to shed some light on our understanding of humorous effects. Semioticians, who study both verbal and non-verbal communication, have indeed applied their approach to the analysis of humorous data. Milner, for example, sees the essence of humour as the juxtaposition of two distinct universes of discourse (Milner, 1972). Following Saussure (1974) and Lyons (1977), who see meaning in terms of differential relations, Milner suggests that the most effective means of achieving

differential meaning - and thereby creating the necessary clash of universes - is through the process of reversal. For Milner, then, a joke is simply a form of reversal (Milner, *ibid*). He identifies three types of reversal: paradigmatic (i.e. puns), syntagmatic (i.e. spoonerisms) and paragrammatic (i.e. chiasmic structures). In spite of his use of the terms pun and spoonerism, Milner regards all these types of reversal as situational as well as verbal.

To look at humour within the framework of pragmatic theory is necessarily more restrictive, since pragmatics deals only with verbal communication, while humour is neither exclusively, nor even primarily, verbal. In spite of this, it seems to me that there is a lot to be gained from approaching humour from this perspective. In order to understand why, we need to consider, in some detail, the aims of pragmatic theory.

1.4. The aims of pragmatics

I have already made the point that while semantics tells us what a sentence means, pragmatics tells us what an utterance conveys. A simple example will illustrate the inadequacy of semantic theory when it comes to accounting for the full interpretation of an utterance in context. Consider (2).

(2) The queen is dead.

In interpreting an utterance of (2) the hearer would have to know, first, which particular queen is being referred to at which particular time, and second, whether dead is being used literally or metaphorically. The speaker might not be describing the physical state of the queen but rather her lack of power or prestige. Or she might be expressing her opinion that the monarchy is an anachronism. Lastly, the hearer would have to disambiguate the word queen. Is the speaker referring to a female sovereign, as I have so far assumed, a fertile female bee, or a gay man? (The complete utterance is also, incidentally, the title of a song by the (disbanded) pop group 'The Smiths', a fact which opens up yet more possibilities.)

Reference assignment, disambiguation, and decisions about whether an utterance is literally or figuratively intended are just a few of the wide range of processes that pragmatic theory must be able to account for. (On the goals of pragmatics, see Levinson, 1983, Chapter 1, Sperber and Wilson, 1986, Chapter 1; Leech, 1983, Chapter 1.) The central problem is quite simply this: how is it, that the hearer is able to pick, not just any interpretation of (2), but the interpretation intended by the speaker?

Broadly speaking, there are two different answers to this question, depending on which model of pragmatics is adopted. Code theorists see pragmatics as an extension of the grammar: they believe that the semantic representation of the sentence (sentence meaning), together with pragmatic rules and a

description of the context, will yield the correct interpretation of the utterance (utterer's meaning). Raskin's semantic (sic) theory, which uses a script-based lexicon and combinatorial rules, is, in fact, a pragmatic theory based on this model.

At the centre of Raskin's semantic theory is the notion of script. "The script", according to Raskin, "is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. (It) ... is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world." (Raskin, *ibid*: 81) A script-based lexicon, then, does not just contain information about the inherent meaning of individual words, it also contains information about how those words are actually used and the objects they denote. The combinatorial rules tell us the ways in which individual words can be combined to form meaningful strings.

If we take doctor, for instance, the lexicon will tell us that this word, used as a noun, can have any of four meanings: the 'physician' meaning; the 'Ph.D.' meaning, the 'mechanical troubleshooting device' meaning and the 'artificial fly' meaning. A script-based lexicon will supply further information about each of these four meanings so that when the word doctor occurs in a sentence (Raskin talks about sentences as opposed to utterances), the hearer will be able to decide which of these four meanings, or scripts, was intended. According to Raskin, this is not usually difficult, as there will be other words in the sentence

which will evoke a similar script. In (3), for example, doctor combines with ill to evoke the 'physician' meaning.

(3) She looked so ill I decided to call the doctor.

If there is no other word in the sentence to assist the hearer in the selection of the correct interpretation, contextual clues, including information conveyed in previous sentences, will be brought into play. In (4), for example, it is obvious, from the preceding remark, that queen refers to our female sovereign.

(4) A: Why are there so many people outside Buckingham Palace?

B: Didn't you know? The queen is dead.

The assumption behind Raskin's approach is that although choices have to be made when we come to interpret an utterance, these choices are well defined in advance and strictly limited. It is on this point that Raskin, and other exponents of the code model, differ from the inferentialists, who believe that when it comes to interpreting utterances in context the possibilities are literally limitless. An example will illustrate just how far removed utterance meaning can be from sentence meaning, and how crucial, therefore, is our ability to draw the correct inferences. Consider (5).

(5) Andy goes shopping.

(5) is a newspaper headline. It appeared in The Observer on 1 March, 1987, shortly after the death of Andy Warhol. To interpret this headline one would have to know that Warhol once compared death - or life after death - to a shopping trip:

(6) I never think that people die - they must go to department stores. (Andy Warhol)

The point about (5) is that it illustrates how an utterance can be used to convey virtually anything at all, given an appropriate context. The problem for Raskin lies in explaining exactly how we construct the context that enables us to interpret the utterance in (5) as being roughly synonymous with (7):

(7) Andy Warhol is dead.

Although Raskin takes account of our inference-drawing abilities in utterance interpretation, he limits his discussion to familiar examples which can be easily accounted for. At the dinner table, for instance, a question such as:

(8) Can you pass the salt?

would be appropriately perceived, not as a question, but as a polite request. More complex examples such as (5), where the contextual clues cannot be so easily codified, are just not discussed (note 2).

Before we look at an alternative to this approach to utterance interpretation, we will consider how the code model might be applied to a study of verbal humour.

1.5. A code model of humour

In applying his semantic theory to the analysis of humorous data, Raskin makes a distinction between bona-fide and non-bona-fide discourse. Bona-fide discourse is governed by Grice's co-operative principle and maxims, while non-bona-fide discourse is governed by quite different principles. When speakers are in joke-telling mode, for example, "the hearer does not expect the speaker to tell the truth or to convey to him any relevant information" (Raskin, *ibid*, p 103). In other words, jokes do not conform to the expectations we have of normal (i.e. bona-fide) discourse.

Another important point about Raskin's approach is that he believes that it is possible to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to qualify as a joke. A text can be characterised as a joke, he says, if the following conditions are satisfied.

- "1) The text is compatible, fully, or in part, with two different scripts
 - 2) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite"
- (Raskin, ibid: 99)

Raskin then goes on to identify three basic types of script oppositeness:

- 1) actual vs. non-actual situation;
- 2) normal, expected state of affairs vs. abnormal, unexpected state of affairs;
- 3) possible, plausible situation vs. fully or partially impossible or much less plausible situation.

The following example, one of Raskin's own, will illustrate. Consider (9).

- (9) "Is the doctor in?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.
- "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in."

In (9) the words patient and bronchial help to evoke the 'physician' meaning of the potentially ambiguous word doctor. The script evoked is one in which a patient is visiting his doctor because he has bronchitis. However, the doctor's wife

replies in such a way as to evoke a very different script indeed. The fact that she is young and pretty and whispers her reply is at first incongruous, until we realise that there is another script operating here - one in which two lovers are meeting in secret (and the spouse of one of these happens to be a doctor). The type of script oppositeness that occurs in this example is one in which a normal, expected state of affairs (patient visits doctor) contrasts with an abnormal, unexpected state of affairs (patient visits doctor's wife when her husband is out). According to Raskin, this is a case of the doctor script overlapping with the lover (or adultery) script. (It may be a small point, but I would want to argue that, if anything, it is the patient script which overlaps with the lover script, since it is the patient, not the doctor, who is committing adultery.)

One problem with this analysis is that it does not take account of the speaker's intentions, committing us to the classification of the exchange in (9) as a joke, simply by virtue of the words used and the way these are combined. And yet it is not so very difficult to imagine a context in which the exchange in (9) takes place, with no humorous overtones whatever.

Indeed, the view that it is possible to account for verbal humour solely in terms of the linguistic properties of the text is difficult to sustain, since virtually any utterance can be construed as either humorous or non-humorous, depending on the context. Take, as another example, the following.

(10) Customer: I wondered if you have these in a fourteen?

Assistant: You what? This is a boutique, not the Elephant House. (Wood, 1985)

If we are amused by (10), this is at least partly because we recover Wood's intention to amuse. If we fail to recognise her humorous intention, the assistant's reply would be considered offensive and highly insulting.

Raskin fails to acknowledge the tenuousness of the humorous remark, a flaw which, perhaps, is inevitable, given his emphasis on the lexicon and combinatorial (semantic/pragmatic) rules, and his concomitant disregard for speaker intentions. In the course of this thesis we will look at what I consider to be more promising alternatives to this approach to utterance interpretation: the Searle-Grice and the relevance-theoretic models.

1.6. Inferential models of humour

The Searle-Grice and the relevance-theoretic models are termed inferential theories because they are based on the view that successful communication is possible because the hearer is able to work out what the speaker intended to convey (Grice, 1971; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969; Searle, 1971; Searle, 1979). This is not to say that either theory denies that knowledge of a code

forms a necessary part of our ability to communicate verbally with one another: they are called inferential theories because of the emphasis they place on the inference-drawing aspect of the interpretation process. Moreover, these two theories differ from each other quite considerably in the degree of importance that they attach to our inference-drawing abilities. Indeed, if we were to place Raskin, Searle and Grice, and Wilson and Sperber on a continuum, Raskin would be at one end, Wilson and Sperber would be at the other, and Searle and Grice would be somewhere in the middle. In other words, to talk of code models and inference models as though the two were completely separate entities, masks the fact that some, perhaps most, theories have a foot in both camps. The Searle-Grice and relevance-theoretic models will be described in full in subsequent chapters. It is sufficient at this stage to point only to those differences which will affect our expectations when it comes to enhancing our understanding of verbal humour.

1.7. Speech act theory and humour

We have established that the aim of pragmatics is to explain how it is that the hearer recognises the speaker's intentions in communication. If humour is intended, this is a central part of what is communicated, and an adequate pragmatic theory must be able to explain how we arrive at the speaker's humorous

intention. This involves being able to account for the first two of the following four categories:

- 1) speaker intends humour - hearer amused;
- 2) speaker intends humour - hearer not amused;
- 3) speaker doesn't intend humour - hearer amused;
- 4) speaker doesn't intend humour - hearer not amused.

This is another way of saying that speech act theory, along with any other pragmatic theory, should be able to describe and explain all intentional verbal humour (note 3).

It should be mentioned that this is not the stated aim of most speech act theorists working on humour. They are generally careful to delineate those categories of jokes which fall within their frame of reference. Hancher (1980), for example, notes that a humorous effect can be obtained when the maxims are violated, but he does not say that maxim violation is the sole factor in the creation of the comic, nor does he rule out the existence of other mechanisms as being capable of producing a humorous effect. Yamaguchi (1988) is even more restrictive. He looks exclusively at a category of joke known as the garden-path joke, and makes it clear that his analysis can only be called on to explain this joke-type.

In spite of the caution displayed by the speech act theorists, I have attempted to extend the analysis (using Leech's modification of the theory) to cover a wider range of data. It is thus on my terms, as they are stated above, that the theory is evaluated.

1.8. Relevance theory and humour

We will see that relevance theory is altogether more ambitious than its rivals. Wilson and Sperber have gone beyond the problem of explaining how utterances are interpreted to consider the much broader question of what principles govern our processing of information in general, whether that information is conveyed verbally or non-verbally. Their theory, then, is a theory, not only of communication, but of cognition. The wider scope of relevance theory means that we will expect it to be able to account for a more comprehensive range of data. Two sources of humour immediately spring to mind as falling within the scope of relevance theory, while eluding most speech act theorists. They are:

- 1) non-verbal humour; and
- 2) unintentional humour.

In contrast to standard speech act theory, relevance theory sets out to account for all communicative behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal. In addition to verbal humour, then, relevance theory should be able to give us an account of humour deriving from non-verbal stimuli - pictures and mime, for example.

Unintentional humour refers to those instances where an individual is amused by an event, act or utterance, quite independently of the intentions of the creator (if one exists) of the humour stimulus. Unintentional humour may be inadvertently

communicated, but because the effect is created accidentally, we cannot expect speech act theorists to give us an account of it (note 4).

Because of the inherent differences between the two approaches, it should be made clear at the outset exactly what is to be expected of each theory. As I have already stated, we should expect speech act theory to be able to account for all intentional verbal humour while relevance theory should be capable of accounting for all humour, be it verbal or non-verbal, intentional or unintentional. In spite of this, I have chosen to exclude non-verbal humour from my analysis. To consider instances of non-verbal humour would take the discussion too far away from the concerns of the speech act theorists, and since this is essentially a comparative study, it seems inappropriate to pursue an aspect of humour which is so clearly outside their domain. Unintentional humour is briefly discussed, however, since I believe that it can shed light on humour that is intentional. Moreover, it will become clear that the distinction between intentional and unintentional humour is not always easily drawn.

1.9. Concluding remark

Finally a few words about the absurd. It should be emphasised that it is outside the scope of this study to offer a definition

of the absurd, a notion which I take more or less for granted. In other words, I take it as given that there are certain situations which are perceived as humorous, just as there are other situations which are perceived as sad, or tragic. This is not to say that everyone finds the same things funny, or even that the same person can be guaranteed to be consistent in his appreciation of humour. Indeed, the huge variations which occur in our responses to humour are well-documented (see, for example, Wolff et al., 1934; McGhee, 1973; La Fave et al., 1976; Bourhis et al., 1977; Sheppard, 1977; Brodzinsky and Rightmyer, 1980; Dolitsky, 1986; Cetola, 1988; Ruch et al., 1991). Raskin acknowledges that these individual differences exist, and makes it clear that his theory represents an idealised state of affairs:

"... the theory is formulated for an ideal speaker-hearer community, i.e. for people whose senses of humour are exactly identical." (Raskin, *ibid*: 58)

We have already seen that Raskin is concerned with identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to qualify as a joke, which means that, for the purposes of his theory, these individual variations must be excluded from his analysis.

My aims are somewhat different. I am not trying to produce an algorithm for the production of a verbal joke; rather I want to understand what it is about an utterance which facilitates the

evocation of the absurd. After all, a joke is not funny simply because it describes a ludicrous or amusing state of affairs, as a comparison between (10) and (11) will demonstrate.

(10) Two taxis collided and 30 Scotsmen were taken to hospital.

(Woody Allen)

(11) Scotsmen are very mean. They travel in enormously overcrowded taxis to avoid paying the full fare. Once two taxis containing 30 Scotsmen collided. The passengers were taken to hospital.

(Wilson and Sperber, 1984: 23)

(10) and (11) describe an identical situation. In normal circumstances, (10) would be seen as comic, while (11) would not (note 5). It is for pragmatics to explain the differing effects created by examples such as (10) and (11). My goal, then, is to identify and describe the structural and contextual properties of humorous utterances and thereby increase our understanding of how the absurd is exploited and brought to mind. This will help us to understand how humorous effects are obtained, and how jokes are manufactured.

CHAPTER TWO

A MAXIM-BASED APPROACH TO PRAGMATICS

2.1.1. The Searle-Grice model of communication

The Searle-Grice model is more or less what its name suggests: a synthesis of Searle's speech-act theory and Grice's maxim-based approach to communication. This model is widely accepted among pragmatists - Searle included - who are aware that, on its own, speech-act theory fails to give an adequate account of the interpretation of nonliteral utterances (see, for example, Searle, 1979: 32). Although it is not clear to what extent Grice would have accepted this model, there is a general consensus that at least a subset of Grice's output is compatible with Searle's analysis (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Leech, 1983).

In this section I will look first at the theory of speech-acts. This will be followed by an introduction to the work of Grice, after which it will be possible to consider how the two approaches can be combined. My aim in this outline is merely to remind the reader of the most salient features of the speech-act approach, especially those which have been used in the application of this model to the analysis of humour.

2.1.2. The theory of speech acts

Speech-act theory was largely inspired by the work of J. L. Austin, who argued that language should be viewed as a social, rather than a scientific, tool (Austin, 1962). This led Austin to emphasise the functional aspect of language use. For example, the utterance in (1):

(1) Can you open the door?

can function either as an enquiry ("Are you capable of opening the door?") or as a request to do something ("Open the door, please"). Moreover, the effect that the utterance has on the hearer depends on which of these two interpretations is chosen. If the hearer interprets the utterance as an enquiry, he will, in normal circumstances, give a yes-no verbal response; if he interprets it as a request to open the door, he will, if he is feeling co-operative, carry out the action required of him. These, and other, observations led Austin to claim that saying involves doing. The speech act, he argued, consists of three distinct, but interdependent, activities:

1) The locutionary act

This is the act of uttering a particular sentence with a specific sense and reference.

2) The illocutionary act

This is the act the speaker intends to perform in uttering a sentence.

3) The perlocutionary act

This is the act performed as a result of the speaker uttering a sentence.

The example in (2) will illustrate these different activities.

(2) Would you like a cup of coffee?

The locutionary act is the actual utterance of the sentence, "Would you like a cup of coffee?" This utterance has the illocutionary force (i.e. function) of an offer and the perlocutionary force (i.e. effect) of making the addressee feel welcomed (Austin, 1962, lecture VIII; Kempson, 1977: 4.2).

Of the three, it is the illocutionary act which has aroused the most interest, and many attempts have been made to identify and describe the various types of illocution. Searle's taxonomy is probably the most widely accepted, so it is this which is given below (Searle, 1979).

2.1.3. Types of illocutionary act

Assertives

The speaker is committing herself to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g.

- The sky is clear tonight.
- Aston Villa beat Liverpool.

Directives

The speaker is trying to get the hearer to do something, e.g.

- Take a seat.

Questions are seen as a sub-class of directive, since in asking a question the speaker is trying to get the speaker to answer, and this clearly counts as an activity. So another example of a directive might be

- Did Aston Villa beat Liverpool?

Commissives

The speaker is committing herself to some future course of action, e.g.

- I'll mark those papers.
- I'll cook the dinner.

Expressives

The speaker is expressing her emotions, e.g.

- I'm so sorry.
- Congratulations!

Declarations

These correspond to Austin's performatives. The speaker is 'saying something in order to make it so', e.g.

- I pronounce you man and wife.
- I sentence you to ten years.

Sometimes two direct illocutionary points can be made in the same utterance. Searle (1979: 28) gives as an example a protest, which, he says, involves both an expression of disapproval (expressive) and a petition for change (directive). The claim is, however, that everything we say - whether it contains one or more illocutionary points - is classifiable under these five main categories (Searle, *ibid*: 29).

2.1.4. Direct and indirect speech acts

These illocutionary acts can be further subdivided according to whether the act is performed directly or indirectly.

In some cases the speaker means literally and exactly what she says. If, for example, a speaker were to utter (3):

(3) The sky is clear tonight

purely and simply in order to inform her addressee that the sky is clear on the night that the utterance takes place, then the

speaker of that utterance would be said to have performed a direct speech act of asserting that the sky was clear on the night in question.

Searle (1979, chapter 2) is particularly interested in what he terms indirect speech acts, where the speaker 'means what he says, but also means something more' (Searle, *ibid*: 30). We have already seen that the utterance in (1) above can be used, not only as a question, but as a request. For Searle, such utterances have (potentially) two illocutionary forces. The utterance in (1) has the direct illocutionary force of a question:

(4) Are you physically capable of opening the door?

and the indirect illocutionary force of a request:

(5) Open the door, please.

Searle believes that utterances such as (1) are 'conventionally' used to issue directives (Searle, 1979: 36), and further, that the indirect illocution has primacy over the direct illocution (Searle, 1979: 30). He illustrates this last point with the following example:

"... a speaker may utter the sentence 'I want you to do it', by way of requesting the hearer to do something. The sentence is incidentally meant as a statement, but it is also meant primarily as a request." (Searle, 1979: 30, my emphasis.)

It should be mentioned here that the role played by convention in the issuing of indirect requests is disputed by Sadock (1974), who believes that these utterances are simply ambiguous. This question will be dealt with in more detail in a later section.

2.1.5. Felicity conditions

Austin talked about utterances that were infelicitous or 'unhappy' (Austin, 1962, lecture II). He produced a set of conditions that must be met if the utterance is to be carried out properly, or felicitously. Searle (1969, chapter 3; 1971: 46-53) extended this, and it is his classification of four kinds of condition that we will look at now.

1) Preparatory conditions

The utterance must be appropriate to the context. If the utterance has the illocutionary force of an order, for example, the speaker must have some authority over the hearer.

2) Propositional content conditions

These specify restrictions on the content of any given utterance. A promise, for example, has to refer to some future action on the part of the speaker.

3) Sincerity condition

The speaker must be sincere. Thus an apology must be accompanied by the belief on the part of the speaker that she has acted wrongly or improperly.

4) Essential condition

If the speaker intends her utterance as, say, an assertive, then the utterance must have certain properties. The contradiction in (4), for example, could not count as an assertive because it is impossible to commit oneself rationally to its literal truth.

(4) It's raining and it's not raining.

These conditions have to be met before the illocutionary act can be said to be successfully performed. If they are violated in some way, they lead to misfires or abuses (Austin, 1962: 16). According to Austin, an utterance misfires if the illocutionary act is rendered void for some reason. He gives as an example a person taking a marriage vow when he is already married. An utterance can also misfire if there is no satisfactory uptake. Challenging someone to a duel, for example, requires an acceptance on the part of the addressee. Abuses occur when the

speaker violates the sincerity condition - by promising to do something, for example, when she has absolutely no intention of carrying out her promise. Austin was aware of the difficulty of accurately distinguishing between misfires and abuses (Austin, 1962: 16), and indeed Searle prefers to talk in more general terms about the violation of the conditions leading to utterances which are defective (Searle, 1969: 54).

2.1.6. Grice's approach to communication

Grice made a number of important observations about the nature of communication, and these have been incorporated by Searle into the speech act framework.

2.1.7. Natural and non-natural meaning

First, Grice distinguished between natural and non-natural meaning, or meaning NN (Grice, 1957: 54). Natural meaning has nothing to do with intentional communication, and therefore it need not concern us here. The notion of non-natural meaning, on the other hand, is central: it refers to meaning which is intentionally communicated, but more than that, it represents an attempt to state, in formal terms, what is actually happening when we communicate with one another. Grice defines meaning NN (that is, non-natural meaning) thus:

"'A meant NN something by x' is (roughly) equivalent to 'A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention'" (Grice, *ibid*: 58).

Searle declares this to be a "very useful beginning of an account of meaning" (Searle, 1969: 43), and offers this paraphrasing of Grice's view of what it is to mean something by what one says:

"In speaking I attempt to communicate certain things to my hearer by getting him to recognise my intention to communicate just those things.....He understands what I am saying as soon as he recognises my intention in uttering what I utter as an intention to say that thing."

(Searle, 1969: 43)

In short, Grice sees utterance interpretation as being largely a matter of recognising the speaker's intention, a view which Searle adopts, but with the important proviso that, for him, meaning is not just a matter of intention; it is also a matter of convention (Searle, 1969: 43; Searle, 1971: 46).

2.1.8. The co-operative principle and maxims

Another crucial contribution of Grice's to the Searle-Grice model centres on his view that conversation is essentially a co-operative activity. Communication is only possible, Grice argued, because speakers conform to some global standards of communication:

"Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are, characteristically, to some degree, at least, co-operative efforts. Each participant recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose, or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction." (Grice, 1975: 66)

On the basis of this observation, Grice postulated the existence of a Co-operative Principle (CP):

"Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."
(Grice, *ibid*: 67)

He then goes on to identify nine rules or maxims classified into four categories which, together with the CP, govern all human communication:

Maxims of quantity

- 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxims of quality

Super-maxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- 1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- 2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of relation

- 1) Be relevant.

Maxims of manner

Super-maxim: Be perspicuous.

- 1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- 2) Avoid ambiguity.
- 3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- 4) Be orderly. (Grice, ibid: 66-67)

2.1.9. 'Violation of the maxims' and conversational implicatures

Grice did not, of course, believe that speakers adhere blindly to these maxims all the time. In fact he was interested in the effects that can be obtained when they are violated in some way.

Grice saw violation of the maxims as a means by which speakers are able to 'mean more than they say'. As for the CP, its importance lies in its explanatory role. It is because we see conversation as a co-operative activity that we are able to interpret these violations of the maxims in the first place. The following example will illustrate.

(7) A: Do you want to see 'Hedda Gabler' tonight?

B: I went yesterday.

In normal circumstances, B's reply would be taken as declining A's invitation. How is it that B is able to refuse the invitation without actually spelling it out?

According to Grice, it is B's superficial violation of the maxim of relation (be relevant) which makes this possible. When a maxim appears to have been violated, the hearer will nonetheless assume that the speaker is co-operating in the exchange and observing the maxims at some deeper level. Drawing on her background knowledge (people do not normally see the same play two nights running) and her ability to draw inferences, she will be able to recover the implied material:

(8) B does not want to see 'Hedda Gabler'.

It is the belief that B is observing the maxims that makes it possible for A to interpret B's reply as a refusal. In

recognising the importance of this to successful communication, Grice introduced the term conversational implicature. Put simply, a conversational implicature is the assumption (or assumptions) a hearer has to make in order to preserve the belief that the CP and the maxims have been observed.

Let's look at another example. Consider the exchange in (9).

- (9) A: Do you like Beckett?
B: Well, I like his novels.

By ignoring part of A's question, B appears to be violating the first maxim of quantity here (make your contribution as informative as is required). In interpreting B's response, A will nonetheless assume that B is observing the CP. By drawing on her knowledge that Beckett is famous primarily as a writer of plays, she will then be able to recover the intended conversational implicature:

- (10) B does not like Beckett's plays.

Again, A is able to draw the correct inferences - and arrive at B's intended meaning - because he assumes that B is conforming to the CP and the maxims. Thus, in these cases, it is only in a very superficial sense that the maxims can be said to have been violated.

2.1.10. Violation of the maxims

Sometimes speakers really do violate the maxims, however. There are a number of reasons why they might do this:

1) A speaker may covertly violate a maxim in order to mislead her addressee. To tell a lie is to violate covertly the first maxim of quality (do not say what you believe to be false).

2) A speaker may wish to opt out of a maxim by indicating in some way that he is unwilling to co-operate. The defendants in the McCarthyite trials in the US opted out by refusing to answer their interrogators directly, since by doing so they might have incriminated themselves. The exchange in (11), in which the defendant pleads his constitutional right to silence, was typical.

(11) - Are you, or have you ever been, a member of the
Communist Party?

- I plead, sir, the Fifth Amendment

3) A speaker may be faced with a clash: that is to say, she may be unable to fulfil one maxim without violating another. Grice quotes the example of a speaker being unable to fulfil the first maxim of quantity (be as informative as required) without violating the second maxim of quality (have adequate evidence for what you say).

4) Most interesting of all is the deliberate flouting of a maxim. When this gives rise to a conversational implicature, it is said that the maxim is being exploited. It is this notion of exploitation of the maxims that enables Grice to explain how we recover nonliteral interpretations. Suppose that A has just managed to spill an entire cup of coffee over B, who is dressed for an important meeting in a new suit. B utters:

(12) That was clever of you.

It is not plausible that B really thinks that A is clever. In interpreting (12), A will realise that B is flouting the first maxim of quality (do not say what you believe to be false). She will assume, nonetheless, that B is co-operating in the exchange, and attempting to communicate some true information. She will then recover the ironical interpretation, the opposite of its literal counterpart:

(13) That was not clever of you.

Litotes (understatement), hyperbole (overstatement) and metaphor are all, according to Grice, understood in the same way.

Hearers, on noticing that the maxim of quality has been flouted, will look around for a plausibly true interpretation that is in some way related to the literal one. In the case of irony, as we have seen, the ironical interpretation is the contradictory of the literal interpretation, while for litotes it is a

strengthening, and for hyperbole a weakening, of the proposition expressed. For an example of hyperbole, consider (14).

(14) I'm starving.

If the speaker of (14) looks healthy and well fed, her hearer will realise that the maxim of quality is being exploited and recover the conversational implicature, a somewhat weaker version of (14):

(15) I'm very hungry.

Grice (1975: 73) has argued that the deliberate exploitation of the other maxims can also give rise to conversational implicatures. Compare (16) with (17).

(16) Miss X sang 'Home sweet home'.

(17) Miss X produced a series of sounds which corresponded closely with the score of 'Home sweet home'.

This is one of Grice's examples. Clearly (17) is a deliberate violation of the maxim of manner (be brief). By expressing herself in such convoluted terms, the speaker of (17) is able to convey, by means of implicature, some additional information about the (poor) quality of Miss X's singing.

Violation of the maxim of relation occurs when a speaker refuses to make his utterance relevant to the preceding one. Consider the exchange in (18). The setting is a genteel tea party.

(18) A: Mrs. X is an old bag.

(appalled silence)

B: The weather has been quite delightful this summer,
hasn't it?

Again, this is one of Grice's examples (Grice, 1975: 72). B's (irrelevant) reply implicates that he disapproves of A's remark and is not prepared to discuss it. He changes the subject.

For an example of how the maxim of quantity can be exploited, imagine this scenario. A married couple has just had a row. The husband puts on his hat and coat and stomps to the door. The following exchange takes place.

(19) Wife: Where are you going?

Husband: Out!

The husband is violating the maxim of quantity here (make your contribution as informative as is required), since it is obvious from his actions that he is going out. His reply therefore carries some additional information, either (20), perhaps, or (21):

(20) It's none of your business.

(21) I don't know (but I wouldn't tell you if I did).

Maxim exploitation is crucial to Grice's account of utterance interpretation: we will see that it is equally crucial when it comes to applying the Searle-Grice model to verbal humour. (For discussion of this aspect of Grice's work, see Levinson, 1983: 104-105; 109-113; 147-162. For criticism, see Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 35-38).

2.1.11. Searle and Grice - a synthesis

Grice's implicatures correspond to Searle's indirect speech acts: both are concerned with what is implicit in an utterance. Grice's maxims complement (and sometimes overlap with) Searle's felicity conditions: both impose constraints on what is conversationally acceptable or appropriate. It must be pointed out, however, that for Searle there is a fundamental difference between his conditions and Grice's maxims. The felicity conditions are necessary conditions, without which the illocutionary act cannot be successfully performed. For example, if I promise to do something when I have no intention of carrying out the action described, I have violated the sincerity condition, and have failed, quite simply, to make a promise. A commissive, in other words, cannot count as a commissive if

certain conditions are not met. In contrast, Grice's maxims are pragmatic rules which govern, or regulate, our conversation. To take an example, if I make an assertion, but by doing so inadvertently violate the maxim of relation by telling you something you already know in the mistaken belief that you do not already have that information, this does not affect the fact that I have nonetheless made an assertion. To emphasise this difference, Searle uses the term constitutive rules for the conditions, while the maxims correspond to his notion of regulative rules (Searle, 1969, chapter 2, section 5).

This is not to say that the maxims are any less important than the conditions. Both fulfil an essential role in the interpretation process, as we shall see below.

2.1.12. The interpretation of literal utterances

As far as Searle is concerned, a literal utterance is one in which the meaning of the sentence corresponds exactly to the meaning intended by the speaker (Searle, 1979: 118). Moreover, when it comes to interpreting literal utterances, neither Searle nor Grice believes that there is much to explain. If both speaker and hearer share a code (i.e. speak the same language) utterance interpretation is largely a matter of decoding the meaning of the sentence uttered. Of course some background knowledge is often assumed, for reference assignment and the

disambiguation of ambiguous utterances. In (22), for example, the hearer would have to know which individual is being referred to.

(22) He won't be coming tonight.

2.1.13. Nonliteral utterances

Nonliteral meaning is another matter. Searle sees a nonliteral utterance as one in which the literal sentence meaning and the speaker meaning "come apart" in some way (Searle, 1979: 30). He identifies three main types of nonliteral utterance (Searle, *ibid*: 118):

- 1) metaphorical utterances, where the speaker means something different from what the sentence means;
- 2) ironical utterances, where the speaker means the opposite of what the sentence means;
- 3) indirect speech acts, where the speaker means what the sentence means and something more as well.

In interpreting such utterances, the hearer will first interpret the utterance literally. On finding it inconsistent with Grice's co-operative principle and Searle's theory of speech acts, he will then reinterpret the utterance and recover the intended metaphor, irony or indirect illocutionary force.

Essentially, the interpretation process is seen as a kind of 'mental journey'. A metaphorical interpretation is arrived at by "going through literal sentence meaning"; an ironical interpretation involves the hearer in "going through sentence meaning and then doubling back to the opposite of sentence meaning"; while the interpretation of an indirect speech act "includes sentence meaning but extends beyond it" (Searle, *ibid*: 115).

Searle pays special attention to metaphorical utterances, subdividing them into three types: simple, open ended and dead. In a simple metaphorical utterance, the speaker says that S is P but means that S is R (where S is the sentence, P is the sentence meaning and R is the utterance meaning); in an open ended metaphorical utterance, the speaker says that S is P but means metaphorically an indefinite range of meanings: S is R₁; S is R₂; S is R₃, and so on. A dead metaphor for Searle is indistinguishable from an idiom: the sentence takes on a new literal meaning that is identical with its former metaphorical meaning. That Searle acknowledges the existence of open ended utterances will be particularly important later.

Perhaps an example will illustrate more clearly how speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics might interact in the interpretation of a nonliteral utterance. Consider the following step-by-step analysis of how A might recover the indirect part of B's reply in (7) above.

A thinks:

I have made a proposal to B.

On a literal interpretation, B's reply is not relevant, i.e. it is not an acceptance, rejection, etc.

If he is co-operating in the exchange, observing the maxims, etc., B must mean more than he says.

I know that people do not usually see the same play two nights running.

I also know that it is polite to give a reason for rejecting a proposal.

I can therefore infer that B's reply has the illocutionary force of a rejection. (For detailed workings-out along these lines, see Bach and Harnish, 1979.)

In interpreting (7), A has drawn on the following:

- 1) knowledge of language (grammar);
- 2) background knowledge (memory);
- 3) ability to draw inferences;
- 4) knowledge of conditions on speech acts;
- 5) Grice's principles of communication (the co-operative principle and the maxims).

Of course our ability to interpret utterances does not depend on our knowing about Searle's theory of speech acts or Grice's formulation of the CP and maxims. What speakers are supposed to do is apply unconsciously the pragmatic rules - i.e. (4) and (5) above - that this approach to communication incorporates. To

claim that speakers acquire pragmatic rules is, nonetheless, contentious. The existence of such rules is disputed by Wilson and Sperber, whose own theory of communication is based on the view that there is no special mental apparatus that is specifically pragmatic in nature. I will consider the Wilson-Sperber view in chapter four. The next section of this chapter looks at the Searle-Grice model in relation to verbal humour.

2.2.1. The Searle-Grice model and humour

The Searle-Grice model has been applied to humour by Hancher (1980) and more recently by Yamaguchi (1988) and Attardo (1990). Nash (1985) has also given nominal consideration to both Searle and Grice in his book The Language of Humour. While Nash endorses Hancher's analysis, Yamaguchi and Attardo introduce some interesting modifications. We will consider in turn these applications of speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics to the analysis of verbal humour.

2.2.2. How to play games with words: Hancher's analysis

Hancher begins with the observation that humour often stems from the unexpected and the unconventional. According to speech act theory, linguistic behaviour is governed by convention; unpredictable linguistic behaviour is thus an important source of verbal humour.

A humorous effect can be obtained, according to Hancher, when our expectations are frustrated. Such 'joking duplicity', as he calls it, can operate on two levels: the locutionary level (e.g. puns, double entendres, etc.); and the illocutionary level. He devotes his paper to a discussion of the latter.

Violation of Grice's maxims and Searle's conditions feature prominently in Hancher's analysis, along with the exploitation of illocutionary ambiguity. We will look at each of these three sources of humour in turn.

2.2.3. Illocutionary ambiguity

First, there may be something ambiguous about the illocutionary point of the utterance. Hancher quotes an example from an old Punch cartoon, where an army officer, 'running in his pyjamas, from a smoking barracks, shouting "Fire!" is met by a barrage of artillery, his warning having been mistaken for a command' (Hancher, *ibid*: 21). Hancher makes a distinction between this type of example, which, he claims, is ambiguous on both the locutionary and the illocutionary level ("the illocutionary ambiguity turns on a locutionary ambiguity or pun"), and the type exemplified by the exchange in (1), from another Punch cartoon.

(1) Mistress: Susan, just look here! I can write my name in
the dust on the top of this table!

Housemaid: Lor, Mum, so you can! Now I never had no
edercation myself.

(Punch cartoon, quoted in Hancher, *ibid*: 21)

In (1) the housemaid interprets her employer's utterance as a boast when a complaint was intended: an expressive-directive, in

other words, is interpreted as an assertive. Because indirect speech acts are seen as being inherently ambiguous on the illocutionary level, they provide a rich source of speech act humour. Hancher gives us another example, from a 'Peanuts' cartoon. This time it is the speaker who is exploiting the illocutionary ambiguity: Violet's request for information is cruelly misleading.

(2) Violet: Charlie Brown, would you like to come to a party
next week?

Charlie Brown: Why yes, I'd like that very much.

Violet: I thought you would but I doubt if I'll invite
you anyway.

('Peanuts' cartoon, quoted in Hancher, *ibid*: 21)

Lastly, there can be illocutionary ambiguity when propositional content is attributed to an illocutionary act that in fact has none. (3) illustrates.

(3) "Good morning. And almost everything you hear from now on
will be equally speculative."

(Opening remarks by the moderator of a symposium about
America's next twenty-five years. Harvard Magazine,
July-August, 1977: 82, quoted by Hancher, *ibid*: 21)

Greetings, and other expressions of phatic communion, are generally seen by speech act theorists as being devoid of propositional content; and yet in (3) a form of words which is normally interpreted as a greeting is in fact intended as an expressive-directive. The same technique is employed in the following exchange, attributed to Groucho Marx.

(4) Taxi driver: Have a nice day!

Groucho Marx: I'll have what kind of day I like!

2.2.4. Violation of Searle's conditions

Hancher argues that a comic effect can also be obtained when the felicity conditions on the intended illocutionary act are violated in some way. We will look at a variety of such violations.

A commonly exploited condition is the propositional content rule on directives, which specifies that the propositional content should predicate some future act A of H. The exchange in (5) illustrates.

(5) A: When do you want this order?

B: Yesterday! (Hancher, *ibid*: 24)

The condition is violated here because B's response, "I want you to have supplied this order yesterday", refers, not to a future act, but to a past act A of H.

Another condition that can be exploited is the preparatory condition on request-directives, which stipulates that the person issuing the request have some authority over the addressee. Hancher quotes an example from a Steig cartoon, where an ageing, very slightly built father confronts his strapping six-footer son with the words:

(6) I forbid it - and that's final! (Hancher, *ibid*: 24)

Nobody doubts that in theory the father has authority over his son, but in this cartoon that authority is called starkly into question.

Ironical utterances, according to Hancher, involve violation of the sincerity condition. Consider the 'Peanuts' cartoon which shows Linus shaking Lucy's hand. He is saying, with mock sincerity:

(7) My heartiest congratulations! You did it! You have been crabby for one thousand days in a row! You have just set an all-time record! I knew you could do it! Let me shake your hand again. I'd also like to present you with this specially inscribed scroll commemorating this Historical event. Again may I say, 'congratulations!' You are an inspiration to all the crabby people in the world! (quoted in Hancher, *ibid*: 26)

Finally, we have seen that some utterances carry an additional condition: they require a satisfactory uptake. This can be humorously absent in declarations ('saying something in order to make it so'), which do not count as declarations if the speaker does not use the agreed form of words. Take the court-room example, in which the foreman of the jury is asked by the judge to give a legal verdict. The judge asks the question:

(8) Do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty as charged?

and, as everyone knows, one of only two responses is acceptable:

(9) We find the defendant guilty as charged;

(10) We find the defendant not guilty as charged.

Any variation on the response, however slight, represents a violation of the constitutive rule on declarations. Hancher tells us that, over the years, the New Yorker has exploited, at

least three times, this potential for creating a humorous effect. He quotes the following violations (taken from cartoons):

- (11) We find the defendant very, very guilty.
- (12) We find the defendant guilt-ridden, as charged.
- (13) I find you guilty to the nth degree. (Hancher, *ibid*: 25)

Wash, whose work is considered later in this section, gives us yet another (slightly improved) variation on the theme:

- (14) Clerk of the court: How do you find the defendant? Guilty
or not guilty?
Foreman of the jury: Guilty isn't the word.
(Wash, *ibid*: 114)

What these violations of felicity conditions have in common with those cases involving illocutionary ambiguity is that both contain an element of unpredictability and a concomitant frustration of our expectations. We will see that the same can be said of those cases involving the violation of Grice's *maxims*.

2.2.5. Violation of Grice's maxims

If Searle's conditions can be exploited to comic effect, we might expect Grice's *maxims* to lend themselves to a similar kind of

exploitation. According to Hancher, this is indeed the case. In (15) Lucy is violating the second maxim of quality; in (16) the maxim of relation.

(15) Lucy: Schroeder, why don't you give up this classical music thing? Don't you know that there are over eighty million piano students in this country? And less than one per cent of them ever make a real living at it.

Schroeder: Where did you get those figures?

Lucy: I just made them up.

(Schulz, 1964, quoted in Hancher, *ibid*: 23)

(16) Charlie Brown: I wish I could be happy. I think I could be happy if my life had more purpose to it I also think that if I were happy, I could help others to be happy. Does that make sense to you?

Lucy: We've had spaghetti at our house three times this month!

(Schulz, 1959, quoted in Hancher, *ibid*: 27)

The second maxim of quality requires us to have adequate evidence for what we say. In (15) Lucy is flouting this maxim by quoting statistics in a convincing enough manner, yet when she is challenged to reveal her source of information, she admits, quite readily, that the figures were simply made up.

In (16) Charlie Brown is earnestly trying to discover the key to a happy and fulfilling life when he is abruptly brought down to earth by Lucy's irrelevant remark about the number of times in the past month that she has eaten spaghetti.

The violation of the maxim of relation in (16) is contained in a single utterance. Hancher holds the view that any sustained violation of this maxim destroys any potential for humour, quoting the non-sequiturs in Samuel Beckett's plays as a case in point. The violation of this maxim is funny, he says, when "the break is only occasional and the norm is not really called into question" (Hancher, *ibid*: 27). We will return to this observation in a later chapter.

2.2.6. A proposed modification of the speech act model

Hancher's paper is, by and large, a straightforward application of speech act theory to a fairly wide range of humorous data. It is only in his concluding remarks that he introduces two examples which cannot be easily classified in this framework. The first is a Punch cartoon picturing a married couple, sitting at a table over a pot of coffee:

(17) 'The man has his hands clasped and head bowed in a prayerful attitude, and the woman responds: "Will you stop annoying Him? If your coffee is cold, I'll heat it up.' (Hancher, *ibid*: 27)

If violation is involved here, it is not immediately clear which maxim or condition is being violated. Hancher appeals to Pratt (1977) in this instance, for, according to her, there is an additional regulative rule on requesting: "don't request anything of a superior unless no one else can grant it"; and it is this rule, argues Hancher, which is being violated here.

On the basis of this additional regulative rule, Hancher suggests that there might be a similar rule governing requests among equals: "don't request anything of an equal if you could just as easily do it yourself". He is prompted to make this suggestion on the strength of another cartoon. This depicts two men sitting next to each other on the extreme left of a diner counter, with the salt, pepper and catsup far away to the right. The man on the left says to the other:

(18) Would you please pass the catsup? (Hancher, *ibid*: 27)

It is because this regulative rule is breached, Hancher claims, that the utterance in (18) is comic.

What Hancher is saying, then, is that in addition to the constitutive rules on illocutionary acts (the necessary conditions for the successful performance of such acts) and the general Gricean regulative rules, there are some illocutionary acts which have their own regulative rules as well. It is Hancher's view that the violation of these rules can be responsible, also, for the creation of a comic effect.

2.2.7. Summary of Hancher's viewpoint

Hancher's approach to humour could be summarised as follows.

A humorous effect can be obtained when our expectations are thwarted in some way. This can be achieved by:

- 1) The exploitation of an illocutionary ambiguity. (Either the speaker or the hearer may be responsible. The speaker may deliberately mislead her addressee; the hearer may deliberately pick the wrong interpretation.) See examples (1) - (4).
- 2) The violation of Searle's conditions. See examples (5) - (7) and (11) - (14).
- 3) The violation of Grice's maxims. See examples (15) and (16).
- 4) The violation of the regulative rules on illocutionary acts. See examples (17) and (18).

2.2.8. Humour in a defective exchange: Nash's analysis

Nash, also, sees the violation of these maxims and conditions as a source of humour, but whereas for Hancher the violations are seen as producing an unexpected response, Nash emphasises their role in the creation of a defective exchange. He identifies jokes which play on a "peculiarity of English usage" or on speakers' refusal to "play the social game" (Nash, *ibid*: 115-116). He quotes the following examples, the first of which is already familiar.

- (19) Diner: What's this fly doing in my soup?
Waiter: Looks like the breast stroke, sir.
- (20) Diner: Isn't this cloth a bit off colour?
Waiter: Wait till you see your lobster.

What Nash is talking about, in Hancher's terms, is the exploitation of illocutionary ambiguity, since, in both cases, a complaint is wrongly interpreted as a genuine enquiry. Nash identifies the idiomatic use of language as being instrumental in creating the ambiguity, a point which was also made, incidentally, by Bergson (1911: 115).

Nash further identifies a type of joke which hinges on what he calls a "conversational hang-up". In (21), for example, A

mischievously misleads B by exploiting the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner.

(21) A: How would you like to spend seven days in a Portuguese villa?

B: I'd love it!

A: Good, then you can envy me all next week.

(Nash, *ibid*: 118)

In (2) above a similar exchange was analysed as being another case of illocutionary ambiguity. The respective merits of each analysis will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Nash does not spell out his ideas in much detail, his remarks on Searle and Grice forming only a small part of what is a very general discussion of humour. (Consequently it seems inappropriate to quibble over Nash's rather idiosyncratic terminology.) I have mentioned him here because:

- 1) he endorses, on the whole, Hancher's viewpoint; and
- 2) he isolates some features of the humorous utterance which Hancher has overlooked.

It is unfortunate, however, - and this is important - that Nash's analysis is marred by a quite serious misunderstanding of the nature of Grice's maxims. Again, this will be discussed later.

2.2.9. How to pull strings with words: Yamaguchi's analysis

Yamaguchi devotes his paper to a discussion of garden-path jokes, his comments being applicable only to this joke-type. The term garden-path joke was coined by Hockett (1977), and was used by him to refer to punning jokes of the type exemplified by (22).

(22) Motorist: Can you tell me the way to Bath?

Policeman: I usually use soap and water.

The exchange in (22) can be classified as a garden-path joke because it contains an ambiguity which is at first concealed. When the punch line is delivered, the ambiguity is revealed and the hearer realises that she has been 'led up the garden path'.

(22) hinges on what Hancher would call locutionary ambiguity. Like Hancher, Yamaguchi notes that many jokes involving ambiguity operate on the illocutionary, rather than the locutionary, level. He thus extends the definition to include these jokes as well. For Yamaguchi, then, a garden-path joke is:

"A joke in which the context is potentially ambiguous in that it has potentially a first and a second reading, the former being replaced by the latter at the end of the joke.

(Yamaguchi, *ibid*: 325)

Yamaguchi is primarily interested in those jokes which do not contain puns. His concerns, in other words, are similar to Hancher's: the description of jokes which stem from maxim violation.

Yamaguchi differs from Hancher, however, in that he does not treat the violation that occurs in such jokes as genuine. He believes that there is always a co-operative element which is almost obliterated by the more conspicuous, non-co-operative aspect. Moreover, he argues that the maxim violation is there for the sole purpose of creating the ambiguity on which the joke depends. The narrator of the joke has as little as possible to do with this unco-operative behaviour, passing the responsibility for the deception on to the character in the joke. Yamaguchi calls this the 'Character-Did-It' Hypothesis (note 1).

Essentially, what Yamaguchi is saying is that the maxims are violated in the fictional world only: in the real world the co-operative principle is adhered to. Because as hearers we do not expect jokes to convey information that is either true or relevant, the narrator cannot really be trying to deceive us. To quote Yamaguchi, the joke-teller is a "string-puller" rather than a "leg-puller". We recognise the two levels of discourse, and enter into the fictional world where the maxims are violated, while retaining, at some deeper level, the co-operative relationship with our interlocutor (note 2).

2.2.10. The importance of the implicit in verbal humour:

Attardo's view

Attardo's work is placed loosely within Raskin's framework, in which, as we have seen, a distinction is made between bona-fide and non-bona-fide communication (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1990). In common with Yamaguchi, Attardo stresses the co-operative side of joking behaviour (that is, non-bona-fide communication), citing Zhao (1988), who has shown how jokes can convey information that is both true and relevant. Attardo also notes that everyday conversations (that is, bona-fide communication) can be interspersed with humorous, off-the-cuff remarks. These two observations lead Attardo to the view that the distinction between bona-fide and non-bona-fide communication is less than straightforward.

As for the maxims, Attardo believes that the analysis of humorous data in terms of maxim violation can contribute to our understanding of the hierarchical structure of the maxims themselves. He notes the importance of implicitly conveyed information in humorous utterances, arguing that it is an obligatory feature of jokes that they violate the first maxim of quantity (by not giving enough information). He cites further the work of Van Raemdonck (1986, 1989), who found that all of the 243 jokes he analysed violated the maxim of relation, while only some violated another maxim as well. (We will see in the next section that there is a problem with these findings.) The

importance of these two maxims to the creation of humour lends weight, according to Attardo, to Horn's Q-based and R-based implicatures (Horn, 1984), and to Sperber and Wilson's (1986) "so-called 'relevance' theory" (Attardo, *ibid*: 360). What Attardo is saying is that both Horn and Sperber and Wilson have afforded to the maxims of quantity and relation a higher status than was originally assigned to them by Grice himself, and that the evidence provided by the analysis of humorous data suggests that this restructuring of the maxims is entirely justified.

2.2.11. Conclusion

Wilson and Sperber would be justly dismayed by Attardo's lack of understanding of their theory when he says that they (i.e. Wilson and Sperber) "propose an underlying super maxim of relevance" (Attardo, *ibid*: 360). That particular misunderstanding will be cleared up in chapter four, when we will see that relevance theory cannot simply be viewed as a revised version of Gricean pragmatics.

In the final section of this chapter I will continue my investigation of the speech act account of humour by considering how well it stands up to critical analysis.

2.3.1. Discussion of the Searle-Grice analysis

On the face of it, the Searle-Grice model looks like a promising starting point for a theory of humour, lending itself readily to a description of the kind of humour that stems from utterances which are in some way incongruous, defective, unpredictable, or mischievously deceptive. Indeed the violation approach to humour is now well established in the literature. In addition to the theorists whose work was outlined in the previous section, there are others, most notably Martinich (1981), Morreall (1983: 79-81), Navon (1988), and Fennell (1990), all of whom have incorporated the notion of Gricean maxim violation into their analyses of humour.

Theorists who have embraced the more general notion of rule violation as a source of humour include Schultz and Robillard (1980), Dolitsky (1983) Eco (1986) and Goldstein (1990). Giora argues along comparable lines, claiming that jokes involving ambiguity violate her "Marked Informativeness Requirement" (Giora, 1991).

Yet there are some problems with this approach.

2.3.2. The nature and function of Grice's maxims

The first problem stems from Nash's misunderstanding of the nature of Grice's maxims, resulting in several flawed analyses. Take, for example, the exchange in (1).

- (1) A: And where do you work, Mr Jones?
B: Oh, you know, at the Town Hall.
A: And what do you do there?
B: Oh, you know, Town Hall work. (Nash, 1985: 117)

According to Nash, B is exploiting both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality here. There is no doubt that the first maxim of quantity (calling for sufficient information) is being breached, since B is just not being forthcoming enough to satisfy normal expectations.

To cite the maxim of quality in this context leads Nash into difficulty, however. Remember that there is a super-maxim of quality: "Try to make your contribution one that is true", and two more specific maxims: "Do not say what you believe to be false"; "Do not say that for which you lack sufficient evidence" (Grice, 1975: 67). First, Nash can be accused of vagueness because he talks in general terms about "the maxim of quality", and does not specify which of these maxims is being exploited. A second, perhaps more serious problem, concerns the fact that it is not easy to see why Nash should think that the exploitation of

any of these maxims is involved in this example in the first place. My guess is that it has to do with the idea Nash has that the maxim of quality imposes on us a constraint, not against uttering falsehoods, but against evidently pointless conversations (Nash, *ibid*: 116). This is clearly a mistake on Nash's part. It would appear that he has been misled by the everyday meaning of the word quality into thinking that this maxim is about giving our utterances some direction, when in fact it is merely calling on us to be truthful.

Nash's misunderstanding is compounded in his analysis of the following example, in which, he claims, "all the Gricean rules are side-swiped" (Nash, *ibid*: 117).

- (2) A: Now you take the whale, that's just about the oldest fish in the ocean.
- B: It isn't a fish. It's a mammal. The whale is a mammal.
- A: Well, the Bible says it's a fish. The oldest book in the world says the whale's a fish.
- B: Look, they just didn't know enough in those days. They had a naive taxonomy. If it swam in the sea, they classified it as a fish. We know better now, we know the whale is a mammal.
- A: You're telling me the author of the Bible didn't know what he was doing? The Bible? The book you swear on in court? (Nash, *ibid*: 117)

Whereas Nash's analysis of (1) can be salvaged by appealing solely to the notion of the violation of the first maxim of quantity, and avoiding any mention of the maxims of quality, (2) is more problematic. It is problematic because it is not clear that any of Grice's maxims are being violated in this example. It could be claimed, I suppose, that A is violating the first maxim of quality - if, for example, he really did know that the whale is a mammal - but for Nash to claim that all Grice's rules are being violated is far too wide of the mark.

What has been exposed is a fundamental misconception, on Nash's part, of the role of the maxims. Nash seems to think of them as general social, rather than specifically pragmatic, constraints: that is to say, he sees them as constituting a kind of conversational etiquette: "The work of Grice...puts into theoretical terms what we already know intuitively about conversation...that it is a contract involving...agreed conduct" (Nash, 1985: 116). For Grice, of course, they are necessary tools enabling us to explain how successful communication is possible.

Although Nash's misunderstanding is unfortunate, it cannot be said to undermine the validity of the speech act approach to humour. Hancher does not claim that all verbal humour stems from maxim violation, so the fact that Nash has inadvertently thrown up an example which may fall outside the scope of this approach

does not invalidate the analyses of those examples which can be accounted for in this way. As for Yamaguchi, he would argue that both (1) and (2) are of no interest to him because he is concerned only with deceptive violation, and in neither of these examples is anyone being deceived (or 'deceived').

We will return to the example in (2) later, however, for although it is not the specified aim of the speech-act theorists to be able to give an account of such examples, it will be remembered that it was stated in chapter one that an adequate pragmatic theory should be able to give an account of all intentional verbal humour. We will see that when the theory is extended, examples such as (2), which seem to break social, rather than pragmatic, rules, can be accounted for.

2.3.3. Equivocation and humour

There is a more serious problem with this analysis. It concerns equivocal utterances, that is, utterances which are simultaneously open to more than one interpretation. Hancher acknowledges the existence of equivocation in humorous utterances, recognising that Susan's reply in (3) has two possible interpretations.

(3) Mistress: Susan, just look here! I can write my name in
the dust on top of this table!

Housemaid: Lor, Mum, so you can! Now I never had no
edercation myself.

It is clear to us that in (3) Susan's employer is complaining about the dust on the furniture. Susan's reply indicates that she has interpreted her employer's utterance, not as a complaint, but as a boast. The question is whether the mistake is genuine, or whether Susan is merely pretending not to understand. According to Hancher, it doesn't matter which interpretation we choose, because both are funny. "If this is an ingenuous mistake", he remarks, "it is a funny one. If it is a disingenuous evasion, it is also funny." (Hancher, *ibid*: 21) What Hancher fails to appreciate, however, is that there might be a problem here for speech act theorists. We have already seen that a speech act account of utterance ~~interpretation~~ interpretation commits us to the view that meaning is something which is clearly defined and self-contained. While Searle allows for the fact that some metaphorical utterances may be open to a range of interpretations, he makes no mention of the existence of non-metaphorical utterances which may be similarly open to more than one interpretation. Moreover, there is surely a difference between what Searle refers to as the "open ended metaphorical utterance" (Searle, 1979: 115), in which the individual meanings complement one another, and contribute to the meaning of the utterance as a whole, and the equivocal utterance, in which two,

quite distinct, meanings are in conflict. In the light of examples such as (3), there may be a case for extending Searle's taxonomy of utterance types to include the following:

Literal utterance: (equivocal)

Speaker means what he says, but, on one interpretation, means something more as well. It is an open question which of the two interpretations is intended.

This deals with the bipartite - inane remark or veiled insult - aspect of Susan's reply, and it is in keeping with Grice's approach to deliberate ambiguity (Grice, 1975: 72). However, there is a further problem with this, and other, similar examples. It concerns their inherent indeterminacy, or vagueness.

2.3.4. Indeterminacy and humour

Suppose that Susan was pretending not to understand her employer's utterance. We then have to ask ourselves what point she is trying to make in responding in the way she does. Is she trying to:

- undermine her employer's authority; or
- avoid having to dust the furniture properly?

Maybe she is aiming for both of these. The point is that her reply is not only ambiguous, it is also - on one reading - vague, and the joke owes something to this.

Another such example is the one in (4).

(4) Diner: What's this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Looks like the breast stroke, sir.

As with Susan, we will suppose that the waiter is neither stupid nor crazy, that his reply is not a mistake, but an evasion. Again, the question arises as to what point is being made. Is the waiter aiming to:

- embarrass the diner?
- show the diner who's boss?
- indicate his lack of concern about the level of hygiene in the establishment?
- avoid having to apologise?
- avoid having to throw the soup away and fetch another bowl?

Once more, there is no hard and fast answer. It is up to us, to some extent, to make of the waiter's reply what we will.

Speech act theory has no means of describing these vaguer effects of communication, and so it is unable to give a satisfactory account of what is going on in these examples.

Note that (3) and (4) are not isolated cases. It seems that whenever a hearer ignores the indirect part of an indirect speech act, we are left to wonder whether the misunderstanding was deliberate, and if so, what motives lie behind the superficially inept reply. Take one final example.

(5) Customer: There's a pair of shoes in the window.

Shop assistant: That's right, we do that because it's a
shoe shop. (Wood, *ibid*: 55)

As with the waiter's reply in (4) and Susan's reply in (3), we are forced to ask ourselves whether the shop assistant in (5) is stupid, or whether her singularly unco-operative behaviour has 'hidden meanings'. If we opt for the second of these interpretations, at least some of these weaker implicatures should be recovered if we are to appreciate the humour in the joke.

It is to Nash's credit that he goes a stage further than Hancher by appreciating that, in a humorous exchange, a response to an indirect request is invariably open to a range of interpretations. Take the following:

(6) Diner: Isn't this cloth a bit off colour?

Waiter: Wait till you see your lobster.

Of the waiter's reply, Nash makes this observation:

"Is the waiter joking? Or is he frustrating the intended directive (= 'Change the tablecloth') in order to mark his rebuttal of an implied rebuke? ('Don't try that game with me'; I won't be patronised by sardonic remarks'). Or, a further possibility, does his retort signify a denial of the importance of clean tablecloths? ('What's all the fuss about? You came here to eat, didn't you?)"

(Nash, *ibid*: 116)

However, in common with Hancher, Nash does not appreciate that the theoretical model he has adopted cannot account for the indeterminacy he has described.

As for Yamaguchi, we have seen that his analysis of this type of joke is somewhat different. He makes no allowances for the characters' stupidity: according to him, they are always guilty of deception. (The narrator, on the other hand, is disinterested, and merely reports the deception.) To come down firmly on one side smoothes over the problem of equivocation, and does away with the need for any extension of Searle's inventory of utterance types, but it does not address the rather more intractable problem of what these smart characters are hoping to achieve with their evading tactics. Yamaguchi's analysis thus leads us, by an alternative route, to the same sticking point: the absence, in the speech act model, of the means of capturing the vagueness that is inherent within a specific interpretation.

2.3.5. The speech act account of irony

Another problem arises when we look at the speech-act account of irony. Hancher has adopted the standard speech-act approach, which defines irony in terms of the overt violation of the sincerity condition (cf. Brown, 1980). Hancher quotes as an example, a 'Peanuts' cartoon, the beginning of which is cited again here.

(7) Linus: My heartiest congratulations! You did it! You have
been crabby for one thousand days in a row!

It is clear that Linus intends us to recognise his intentions in (7) as insincere. Unfortunately this is not the whole story, for although the notion of violation of the sincerity condition can explain how we recognise Linus's utterance as ironical, it does not explain how we actually interpret his utterance, and arrive at his intended (ironical) meaning. Searle believes that we first interpret such utterances literally, and, on finding the literal interpretation inappropriate to the context, we then reinterpret them and recover the ironical meaning, which is the opposite of its literal counterpart. Searle is unequivocal about this. In ironical utterances, he says, "the speaker means the opposite of what the sentence means" (Searle, 1979: 115). In straightforward cases, this definition works quite well. Searle gives the example of a speaker saying to his addressee, who has just broken a priceless piece of china:

(8) That was a brilliant thing to do

when the intended meaning is, of course, the opposite:

(9) That was a stupid thing to do.

If we return to (7), however, an indisputable case of verbal irony, we can see that the definition falls apart. The contradictory of (7) would go something like this:

(10) Linus: Commiserations! You failed to do it! You have
been good tempered for one thousand days in a row!
....

And so on. Is this what Linus really means by uttering (7)? Of course not.

Not all theorists have committed themselves to the strong view that an ironical interpretation is invariably the contradictory of the proposition expressed. Grice believed that speakers convey ironical meanings by flouting his first maxim of quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false"). This much broader definition fits Linus' utterance in (7), but it won't do for all cases of verbal irony. Imagine that I get caught in a thunderstorm on my way home, and arrive completely soaked through. If someone were then to say to me (ironically):

(11) You look wet

this could not be analysed as a flouting of the first maxim of quality as the proposition expressed by the utterance would be patently true.

Another apparent counterexample is the following exchange, quoted by Nash (1985: 154), who, incidentally, does not discuss irony in speech-act terms:

(12) A: Are you well?

B: As well as my doctor expects me to be.

(adapted from Nash, *ibid*: 154)

According to Nash, the response in (12) has an ironical reading, which he paraphrases thus:

"My doctor thinks I'm well, but then how would he know, the incompetent quack. If you really want to know, I feel ghastly." (Nash, *ibid*: 154)

The ironical remark in (12) is a play on the conventional remark, "as well as can be expected". The point is, though, that the ironical response is not saying anything false (that is to say, there is no flouting of the first maxim of quality), nor is it insincere.

Grice did later accept that his definition of irony, as it stood, was flawed (Grice, 1978: 123-125). He noticed that irony was closely connected with the expression of feeling or attitude, but failed to build in any substantial way on this insight.

More recently, Haverkate (1990) has noted also that traditional speech act accounts of irony are unsatisfactory. He shows how the narrow definition - saying the opposite of what you mean - is inaccurate because it excludes certain ironical categories; while the broad definition - saying something different from what you mean - includes, in addition to irony, such figures as metaphor, metonymy and hyperbole. Despite these apparently insuperable difficulties, Haverkate does not abandon the traditional account. For him, irony necessarily involves the violation of the sincerity condition: "The basic parameter of my argumentation is the psychological or intentional state of the speaker, which, in current speech act terminology, is called 'sincerity'" (Haverkate, *ibid*: 87).

It is difficult to see why Haverkate should want to cling to this view. The sincerity condition on an assertive requires that S believes p (Searle, 1969: 66). We have already seen that the ironical (12) is not in breach of the sincerity condition: the utterance in (11) - and indeed all ironical understatements - would likewise fall outside this definition. Why do speech act theorists continue to mine the same seam when the significant number of counterexamples suggests quite clearly that a new

approach to irony is needed? We will consider a completely different analysis of ironical utterances in chapter four.

2.3.6. Overlapping descriptive categories

Hancher cites many examples, such as the exchange in (13), where the hearer misses the illocutionary point of the utterance.

(13) Violet: Charlie Brown, would you like to come to a party
 next week?

Charlie Brown: Why yes, I'd like that very much.

Violet: I thought you would but I doubt if I'll
 invite you anyway.

(13) can be compared with (14), which is an example used by Nash.

(14) A: How would you like to spend seven days in a Portuguese
 villa?

B: I'd love it!

A: Good, then you can envy me all next week.

(Nash, *ibid*: 118)

Intuitively there is a good deal of similarity between (13) and (14), and yet for Hancher (13) is a case of illocutionary ambiguity, while Nash analyses (14) as the exploitation, by A, of both the maxims of quantity and manner. Either way of looking at

this type of example seems valid, with Hancher's analysis being applicable to (14), and Nash's analysis being equally applicable to (13).

It should not surprise us that the Searle-Grice model makes possible two different ways of describing the same phenomenon. I mentioned above that there has been some debate as to how utterances such as (15) should be analysed.

(15) Can you pass the salt?

According to Searle (1979, chapter 2), utterances which have the form of a request for information are conventionally used to issue requests for action. Hearers recover the literal interpretation ('Are you capable of passing the salt?'), and, on the basis of Grice's co-operative principle and maxims, they are able to go beyond this and arrive at the speaker's intended meaning: 'Pass the salt, please'.

In contrast to this view, Sadock (1974) believes that the utterance in (15) is ambiguous. In other words, he believes that its use as a request-directive has become standardised, so that the utterance now has two literal meanings, one of which - the request-for-salt-meaning - is an idiom. (The respective merits and demerits of these alternative analyses are discussed in detail by Morgan, (1978), Bach and Harnish, (1979, chapter 9) and Levinson (1983, chapter 5.5)).

If we return to the exchanges in (13) and (14), we can see that by appealing to the notion of illocutionary ambiguity, Hancher's thinking is more in keeping with Sadock's, while Nash has more in common with Searle. It might be interesting to look in more detail at these alternative analyses, to see whether one approach is more useful than the other for our purposes.

2.3.7. Illocutionary ambiguity

We will start by examining more closely Hancher's thinking on the subject of 'illocutionary ambiguity'. Remember that Hancher makes a distinction between locutionary and illocutionary ambiguity. Because his paper is essentially a discussion of humour on the illocutionary level, he chooses not to discuss the former in any detail. He does recognise, however, that jokes involving illocutionary ambiguity may involve locutionary ambiguity as well: "the illocutionary ambiguity turns on a locutionary ambiguity or pun" (Hancher, *ibid*: 21). In fact this type of joke is extremely common. The familiar example, cited again below, is a case in point.

(16) Diner: What's this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Looks like the breast stroke, sir.

On the locutionary level, the two opposing interpretations of the diner's utterance can be paraphrased thus:

- a) What activity is this fly, which happens to be in my soup, engaged in ?
- b) Why is there a fly in my soup?

On the illocutionary level, his utterance can have the force of:

- a) a genuine request for information (directive); or
- b) a complaint/order (expressive/directive).

Moreover, as Hancher points out, the two levels of ambiguity are inextricably entwined, that is, the literal interpretation on the locutionary level corresponds to the utterance as a direct speech act, while the nonliteral interpretation corresponds to the utterance as also performing an indirect speech act.

Jokes involving locutionary ambiguity alone, though not discussed by Hancher, are also fairly common:

(17) A: How do you like school?

B: Closed.

(18) Waiter: How did you find your steak, sir?

Diner: Quite by accident. I moved a few peas and there it was.

Notice that in (17) and (18) a request for information is both intended and interpreted as such, which rules out any ambiguity

on the illocutionary level: the misunderstanding (deliberate or accidental) is purely locutionary.

Now it could be argued that by excluding examples such as (17) and (18) from his study, Hancher is concealing an interesting underlying connection between locutionary ambiguity and some types of illocutionary ambiguity. Notice that in all those cases cited above, the joke plays, not so much on the ambiguity, but on the fact that for each ambiguous utterance there is a 'preferred' interpretation: in (13) and (14) the hearer recovers the most obvious interpretation, only to discover that this is not the one intended by the speaker; in (16), (17) and (18) it is the hearer who is at fault, for picking an interpretation which is not easily accessible to the 'normal' speaker-hearer.

What I am saying is that there is another way of analysing these jokes, namely in terms of whether the responsibility for the misunderstanding lies with the speaker or the hearer. Hancher's analysis, which distinguishes between ambiguity on different levels of interpretation, cuts across this distinction, and obscures what I believe to be a salient feature of these jokes. His analysis forces us to place the joke in (16), for example, in a separate category from the joke in (18). For theoretical purposes this does not seem right.

2.3.8. Violation of the maxims as an alternative to
illocutionary ambiguity

The alternative to Hancher's approach is to appeal instead to the violation of Grice's maxims. We have already seen that the exchange in (14) was analysed by Nash as a violation of the (first) maxim of quantity and the (second) maxim of manner, but what about examples (16), (17) and (18)?

I would want to analyse these latter examples as violations of the maxim of relation, since in each case the hearer utters what is - initially, at least - a response which is irrelevant.

I am not sure that all violationists would agree with this analysis, however. Attardo (1990) quotes the following (famous) example, attributed to W.C. Fields:

(19) 'Do you believe in clubs for young men?

'Only when kindness fails.'

(W.C. Fields, quoted by Attardo, *ibid.* 355)

Attardo analyses the exchange in (19) as a violation of the second maxim of manner, "Avoid ambiguity". As I have already pointed out, I believe that a distinction should be drawn between those cases where the speaker is in the wrong, for misleading his addressee, and those cases where it is the hearer who is at fault, for misinterpreting an utterance whose intended meaning is

perfectly obvious to everyone else. This distinction can be clearly demonstrated, if we analyse the former joke type as involving violations of the maxims of quantity and manner, and the latter - which would include Attardo's example in (19) - as violations of the maxim of relation.

My point is essentially this: whereas it can legitimately be argued that (13) and (14) represent violations of the maxim that requires us to avoid ambiguity, I do not feel that this can be extended to include examples where the hearer picks an idiosyncratic interpretation. In other words, the first speaker in jokes (16) to (19) should not be held responsible for the vagaries of his audience.

2.3.9. Overlapping maxims

Perhaps there was bound to be some disagreement over which maxims were being violated in these examples. Remember that for Attardo all jokes necessarily involve the violation of the maxim of quantity (Attardo, 1990: 360). In the same paper, Attardo cites the work of Van Raemdonck, another violation theorist, who argues that it is the violation of the maxim of relation which seems to be the obligatory requirement: all the jokes in Van Raemdonck's sample violated this maxim while only some violated another maxim as well (Van Raemdonck, cited in Attardo, *ibid*: 359). Attardo does not draw the obvious conclusion from this, namely that he

and Van Raemdonck can't both be right. (It should be mentioned that Grice himself noted a connection between the quantity and relation maxims. See, for example, Grice, 1975: 67.)

If we could resolve the question as to which maxims are being violated in these examples, there is a clear advantage in adopting Nash's analysis over Hancher's. If illocutionary ambiguity as a category is discarded, we are left with violation of the maxims and/or conditions as the sole factor in creating the humour in the examples looked at so far. This, more unified, classification, is less arbitrary, and we can legitimately refer to this approach to humour as a 'violation theory'.

2.3.10. Extending the maxims

A final difficulty lies in the ad hoc nature of some of Hancher's analyses. On the basis of the catsup example (see (18) in the previous section) Hancher posited the existence of an additional rule governing requests among equals: "do not request anything of an equal if you could just as easily do it yourself".

Certainly none of the existing maxims or conditions seem to be involved here. However, to take the view that the maxims can be expanded every time a new type of example needs to be accounted for is a rather unsatisfactory solution to the problem. We have already had an example - see (2) above - which did not seem to involve maxim violation. It could just as easily be argued that

the catsup joke likewise falls outside the scope of the Searle-Grice model. The problem is that in all these cases an unconventional response thwarts our expectations, a principal cause, according to Hancher, of a humorous effect. Moreover, one feels intuitively that something is being violated, even though there is no maxim or condition that can readily explain the violation that occurs.

These are not isolated cases. Consider the exchange in (20). The setting is a trendy boutique.

(20) Customer: I wondered if you have these in a fourteen?

Assistant: You what? This is a boutique, not the Elephant House. (Wood, *ibid*: 87)

The assistant's reply fits our criteria: it is unconventional and unexpected, and it seems to involve some form of rule-breaking. However, once again, the violation of Grice's maxims or Searle's conditions do not seem to be responsible.

What these examples suggest is that there may well be a case for extending the maxims, but not in the arbitrary way proposed by Hancher. Our aim, remember, is to be able to describe and explain all intentional verbal humour. Having isolated several examples which do not fit neatly into the Searle-Grice model, it is time, perhaps, to look further afield for a model which can account for a wider range of data. Leech's pragmatic approach,

which consists of a broad expansion of the maxims, may prove to be just what we are looking for.

CHAPTER THREE

EXPANDING THE MAXIMS

3.1.1. Leech's approach to communication

Discovering new maxims has proved a popular pastime. Grice himself suggested that his list was not exhaustive, while Searle proposed the additional maxim: "Speak idiomatically unless there is some special reason not to" (Searle, 1979: 50). The person who has done most to increase the total number of maxims, however, is Leech (1983), whose contribution to the Searle-Grice model of pragmatic theory will be considered below.

Because I am not primarily interested in evaluating Leech's approach to communication, any difficulties which arise in the course of this presentation will be dealt with only briefly. My main aim in this chapter is to see whether his theory can usefully be applied to humour, and in particular, whether the modifications proposed by Leech can rescue the speech-act model from some of the problems discussed in the previous section. For critical review articles of Leech's theory see Dillon et al. (1985) and Verschueren (1985).

3.1.2. Politeness

Leech was not the first person to identify politeness as an important factor in determining the way speakers chose to express themselves. Brown and Levinson (1978) showed how speakers of quite unrelated languages are motivated by questions of politeness to adopt broadly similar strategies in communicating with others. Leech was clearly inspired by this work (even though he does not give due recognition to the fact), but we will see that his view of pragmatics as a system of interacting principles takes the initial idea much further.

3.1.3. The Politeness Principle

According to Leech, there are other principles governing our conversation besides Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP). The most important of these is the Politeness Principle (PP). The Politeness Principle has been stated informally:

"Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs; maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs." (Leech, 1983: 81)

A 'polite belief' has been defined as a belief that is favourable to the hearer or a third party, while an 'impolite belief' is a

belief that is unfavourable to the hearer or a third party (Leech, *ibid*: 81).

Leech has been criticised for extending the notions of politeness and impoliteness to cover beliefs, rather than merely the communication of beliefs (see, for example, Verschueren, *ibid*: 461), and indeed the idea that a belief (which is a mental representation) can be polite or impolite is rather idiosyncratic.

Another difficulty concerns Leech's use of the terms 'favourable' and 'unfavourable'. Leech does not define these terms, but on the basis of his examples it can be deduced that a favourable belief is one which is likely to please the hearer or a third party, while a belief that is unfavourable is one which will cause the hearer displeasure, or even some discomfort. To take two obvious examples, consider the following.

- (1) I like your new hairstyle.
- (2) Your new hairstyle makes you look really ugly.

I think it is uncontroversial to say that, in normal circumstances, (1) would be considered polite (i.e. favourable to the hearer), while (2) would be considered impolite (i.e. unfavourable to the hearer).

A final terminological difficulty concerns the fact that when Leech talks about politeness he is referring to absolute politeness (Leech, *ibid*: 83). Some illocutions, he argues, are inherently polite (e.g. offers), while others are inherently impolite (e.g. orders). The idea that some utterance types are inherently impolite has also been criticised (Dillon et al, *ibid*: 454). Dillon et al. suggest that politeness would be better defined in terms of how speakers 'manage' or 'mitigate' the performance of such utterances. We will see later that Leech has given some consideration to the 'damage limitation' options open to speakers.

3.1.4. The politeness principle and the co-operative principle

It would be a mistake to assume that the PP is merely a constraint compelling us to go round saying nice things to one another. Leech sees it as a necessary complement to the CP, justified on the grounds that whereas the CP can provide us with an example of how we recover implied material, it does not provide us with an explanation of why we often express ourselves indirectly in the first place. The PP ~~makes~~ good this deficit, and could therefore be seen as an attempt to increase the explanatory adequacy of Grice's theory. Consider the following exchange.

(3) A: Do you like my new boyfriend?

B: Well, I think he's really good looking.

In giving an indirect response to A's question, B can be taken to imply (on one interpretation):

(4) I do not like your new boyfriend.

The CP explains how we recover the implicature in (4), but we have to turn to the PP to understand exactly why B responds in the way he does. According to Leech, B refrains from explicitly expressing an impolite belief (that he does not like A's boyfriend), and in so doing he reaches a neat compromise, sacrificing neither the CP (he is not being untruthful) nor the PP (he is not being impolite).

Sometimes the CP takes precedence over the PP, and sometimes the reverse is true. There are times, for example, when we might feel that to speak the truth, however unpleasant, is more important than being polite. At other times, we might pay lip service to the truth and tell a 'white lie' in order to keep on friendly terms with our addressee. The way the CP and the PP interact, and keep each other in check, will become more evident when we look at the seven additional maxims that the PP generates. These are listed and described below.

3.1.5. The Politeness Maxims

1) The tact maxim

This maxim applies to directives and commissives: "minimize cost to other: maximize benefit to other". (In fact this is Leech's shorthand. Quoted in full, this maxim reads as follows:

"minimize the expression of beliefs that express or imply cost to other: maximize the expression of beliefs that express or imply benefit to other" (Leech, *ibid*: 132). All the other politeness maxims should be similarly expanded.)

It should be noted here that Leech uses the word imply rather loosely. An utterance used as a request might be said to 'imply' cost to the hearer if, in carrying out the request, the hearer has to expend some energy. The utterance in (5) would be an example of such an utterance.

(5) Close the window.

Other terms which require some clarification are self and other, cost and benefit.

Normally self refers to the speaker (s) and other to the hearer (h) or a third party. However, the matter is not clear cut. There are occasions, for instance, when self can be extended to references to people within one's 'sphere of influence' such as a

spouse (Leech, *ibid*: 131). According to Leech, there are speech communities where a man discussing his wife will treat her as self. This will free him, perhaps even oblige him, to denigrate her. (He does not say whether there are also speech communities where wives feel equally obliged to denigrate their husbands.) We will see that there are many other occasions when the distinction between self and other becomes blurred.

As for the notions cost and benefit, Leech leaves these undefined. From his examples, however, we can draw the conclusion that 'cost' refers mainly to physical effort, while 'benefit' includes such traditional pleasures as eating, drinking and going on holiday (Leech, *ibid*: 107).

Leech believes that speakers and hearers know intuitively, depending on the context, the point at which cost to h outweighs benefit. Consider the following.

(6) Mend my bicycle.

In a context where h does not stand to benefit (s is not offering to lend h her bicycle when it is repaired), the utterance in (6) would imply cost to h and would therefore be considered impolite. To minimize cost to h, s can express herself more indirectly. As a result, (7) is far more polite than (6).

(7) Would you mind mending my bicycle?

According to Leech, indirect illocutions are more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because they are more tentative (Leech, *ibid*: 108). Notice that the more tentative, or indirect, the more polite is the request. Thus, other things being equal, (8) is less polite than (7), but more polite than (6).

(8) Can you mend my bicycle?

The person who wanted her bicycle mended had to express herself indirectly because the cost to h was high. In contrast, in a context where the benefit to h outweighs the cost, as in (9), there is no need for indirectness.

(9) Have another chocolate.

In (9) the cost (i.e. the effort required to take a chocolate from a box and put it into one's mouth) is nothing compared to the benefit obtained (i.e. the pleasure derived from eating the chocolate). In other words, if the benefit is great, it is not necessary to minimize the cost by being indirect.

By the same token, the tact maxim can help to explain why a speaker might choose to utter:

(10) Kiss me

in preference to either:

(11) Would you mind kissing me?

or:

(12) Would you like to kiss me?

Again, the speaker of (10) can afford to be direct because he is convinced that the pleasure to be gained from the act of kissing outweighs the effort required to carry out the request. (Other factors are involved here, not least the relationship between speaker and hearer. It is linked to the problem of accurately defining the terms self and other, and will come up again later.)

Although they have the same form as the utterance in (6), the utterances in (9) and (10) would be considered polite (or - more important - they would not be considered impolite). In short, if we are saying something pleasant, or 'favourable', to use Leech's term, form is of little importance. If, on the other hand, we are saying something 'unfavourable' (such as making a request or issuing an order), then the form of words used takes on a good deal of significance. The tact maxim is essentially a constraint urging us to mitigate any unpleasantness, or 'implied cost', with indirectness. We will see later that all the other politeness maxims work in much the same way.

* * * * *

Before going on to look at the other politeness maxims, I want to mention two difficulties. The first is specific to the tact maxim, while the second is a general criticism which can be levelled at all these new maxims. (It will not, however, be raised again.)

First, I am not convinced that Leech's explanation for the greater appropriacy of (7) over (6) is correct. For Leech, remember, the indirect (7) is more polite, and therefore more appropriate, than the direct (6) because the hearer is given the option to refuse to carry out the request (thereby minimizing cost to h). On the contrary, I think that a speaker's preference for the utterance in (7) may be motivated, not by the "other-centred maxim of tact" (Leech, *ibid*: 133), but by self-interest; that is, it may be seen as expedient to utter (7) rather than (6). An indirect illocution, in other words, may place the hearer under a greater obligation to comply with the speaker's wishes than a coldly communicated order.

The second, more generalised, difficulty concerns the supposed immutability of the analysis. Leech seems to think that the propositional content of an utterance, together with its form, will determine exactly where, on the cost-benefit scale, a particular utterance will be placed. It is easy to think of many occasions, however, when the utterance in (9) - to take just one example - would be considered impolite (for example, if the speaker were handing round chocolates in the middle of a church

service). Unfortunately Leech does not seem to take full account of these contextual variations.

* * * * *

2) The generosity maxim

"Minimize benefit to self: maximize cost to self." This maxim, which also applies to directives and commissives, can be paired with the tact maxim. Using Leech's own examples, it explains why (13) is impolite, while (14) is polite.

(13) You can lend me your car.

(14) I can lend you my car.

The offer in (14) is deemed to be polite, first because it implies benefit to h, and second, because it implies cost to s. In the impolite utterance in (13), the relationship between cost and benefit to s and h is reversed.

According to Leech, the speaker of (14) is applying both the tact and the generosity maxims (she is maximizing benefit to other and cost to self), and indeed it is often the case that the politeness or impoliteness of an utterance can be explained in terms of either of these maxims. Sometimes the tact maxim operates alone, however, as in (15), another of Leech's examples.

(15) You can get them for less than half the price at the market. (Leech, *ibid*: 134)

The speaker of (15) is offering some advice which will maximize benefit to other (tact maxim), but as the cost to s is minimal, involving no more than the physical effort required for the actual giving of the advice itself, the generosity maxim is said not to be operating here (Leech, *ibid*: 134).

The generosity maxim can similarly be applied without the tact maxim. Leech gives as an example the following, which, he says, is a polite request for a second helping.

(16) Is there any more X?

Leech argues that the speaker of (16) is minimizing benefit to self (generosity maxim) by omitting reference to s as potential beneficiary. (It could be argued that cost to other is also being minimized here, in which case the tact maxim would be involved as well. This is not a serious problem, however, since - as Leech himself has noted - these two maxims are closely linked (Leech, *ibid*: 133).)

3) The approbation maxim (the 'flattery maxim')

"Minimize dispraise of other: maximize praise of other." It is this maxim, which applies to expressives and assertives, that prevents us from being overtly critical. It may conflict with

the maxim of quality to produce an exchange such as (3) above. We have already seen that B's response in this example satisfies the constraints of both the CP and the PP: he has not conveyed any false information while, at the same time, he has avoided saying anything overtly critical.

It should perhaps be noted that although the full version of the approbation maxim suggests that it applies to the implication (as well as the explication) of impolite beliefs, I do not believe that this is what Leech intended. In fact, in spite of their injudicious wording, all Leech's maxims seem to impose constraints only on what is explicitly stated. In the case of the approbation maxim, we should "avoid saying unpleasant things about others, and more particularly about h" (Leech, *ibid*: 135, *my emphasis*). When it comes to conveying nasty or unpleasant thoughts about others through implicature, it would appear that there are few, if any, constraints on us at all.

4) The modesty maxim

"Minimize praise of self: maximize dispraise of self." Just as the generosity and tact maxims can be paired, so this maxim can be paired with the approbation maxim. both apply to expressives and assertives. Thus (17) is typically polite, while (18) is atypical and impolite.

(17) Your new hairstyle really suits you.

(18) My new hairstyle really suits me.

(Note that if the speaker of (18) were addressing her hairdresser, her utterance would not be considered impolite. This is because she would be applying, not the modesty maxim, but the approbation maxim.)

If we do feel compelled to praise ourselves, then we generally do so in much less effusive terms than those used for the praise of others. For this reason, (19) would be a typical utterance because the speaker is referring to someone else's cooking, while (20) would, in many circumstances, be considered inappropriate. When referring to our own culinary efforts, an utterance such as (21) would probably be more acceptable.

(19) You're a fine cook.

(20) I'm a fine cook.

(21) Actually, I'm not such a bad cook myself.

5) The agreement maxim

Brown and Levinson (1978: 118-121) demonstrated how speakers will sometimes go to considerable lengths to avoid disagreeing with their addressees. Leech's maxim, which is based on this observation, reads as follows: "Minimize disagreement between self and other: maximize agreement between self and other." It is because of this maxim, which applies to assertives, that we tend to play down any disagreement we might have with our addressees. Compare the reply in (22) with the reply in (23).

(22) A: David Lodge is a writer of the first order.

B: Do you think so? I don't rate him at all.

(23) A: David Lodge is a writer of the first order.

B: He's certainly competent.

In (22) B is expressing his disagreement with A quite explicitly, while in (23) he could be said to be doing so implicitly. On Leech's terms, then, the reply in (22) is impolite, while the reply in (23) is polite. If this sounds contentious, it must be pointed out that Leech acknowledges the importance of the relationship between speaker and addressee to the application of these maxims. Broadly speaking, the greater the emotional closeness, the less need there is for us to be polite to one another. Thus the exchange in (22), though 'impolite', would be considered perfectly acceptable between two people who know each other well.

6) The sympathy maxim

"Minimize antipathy between self and other: maximize sympathy between self and other." It is due to this maxim, which also applies to assertives, that we congratulate people on happy occasions and offer our condolences on sad occasions. According to Leech, this maxim is so well established that it is often unnecessary to refer explicitly to the sad event in question. Indeed, to do so may even be considered impolite, as it involves

us in expressing an 'impolite belief'. Thus (24) is usually considered more polite than (25).

(24) I'm sorry to hear about your husband.

(25) I'm sorry to hear about your husband's death.

The point is that (25) implies that the speaker is referring to a sad event; it would be a churlish (and highly unusual remark) if the addressee's husband had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

7) The phatic maxim (?) "Avoid silence" (or "keep talking"). A metalinguistic maxim this, argued for on the grounds that conversation preserves sociability, while silence implies 'opting out'. It explains why so much 'phatic communion' - Malinowski's (1930) term for small talk - appears to violate the CP. While standing on the platform at the railway station, for example, I might commiserate with a fellow traveller and utter:

(26) The train is late again

knowing that my utterance is in breach of the maxim of quantity (be informative). It should be appreciated that utterances such as (26) oil the wheels of our relations with others, and because they have this social function, they do in fact observe the CP.

Leech remains undecided as to whether this maxim should be subsumed under the agreement or sympathy maxims or given independent status, hence the question mark. Certainly, either the agreement maxim or the sympathy maxim can account for the apparent violation of the CP in (26).

It should be noted here that Verschueren (ibid) attacks the confidence with which Leech introduces this maxim, citing Basso's study of the role of silence in Western apache culture (Basso, 1972). In defence of Leech, however, it should also be mentioned that no claims have been made for the universality of the politeness maxims, and further, that Leech is aware that variations across language boundaries will undoubtedly occur (Leech, ibid: 231).

3.1.6. Leech's maxims involve comparative concepts

It must be pointed out that these rules are not absolute; they are observed, as Leech himself puts it, 'up to a certain point' (Leech, ibid: 133). The person who is constantly heaping praise on others, for example, would probably be considered, not polite, but insincere. Thus, in the case of the approbation maxim, the CP (the maxim of quality) seems to keep the PP in check. As we have seen, Leech also appreciates that politeness decreases according to the level of intimacy between speaker and hearer. Notice that (22) is not a rare exception: many of these so-

called impolite remarks - e.g. (5), (6), (13) and (20)- would be appropriate if the speaker were addressing a close friend. While Leech does not spell this out, it would therefore appear that self and other are also relative terms. Other can be seen as merging gradually with self as the relationship between speaker and hearer becomes more intimate.

3.1.7. The other principles

Besides the PP, Leech argues for a further four principles. I will look at these briefly now.

1) Irony Principle

Leech's account of irony is not incompatible with the standard speech-act approach. He adopts the broad definition; that is, he holds that the ironical interpretation is simply different from (and not the contradictory of) its literal counterpart. In another sense, though, Leech's version is narrower. This is because he splits the category into two: the second category, that of banter, will be dealt with later.

Leech's primary concern is in understanding why speakers use irony in the first place. He concludes that irony is a "friendly way of being offensive" (Leech, *ibid*: 144), and posits the existence of an irony principle (IP), a second order principle,

which works by exploiting the (first order) PP. The IP may be stated informally as follows:

"If you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the PP, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature." (Leech, *ibid*: 82)

The example of the spilled coffee in the previous chapter will illustrate. Remember that when B uttered

(27) That was clever of you

he was ironically implicating the opposite. We have already seen how ironical utterances can be said to violate the CP when in fact they are observing it at some deeper level. The PP provides the rationale for this indirect way of expressing ourselves. We are constrained to be polite, and so we uphold the principle on a superficial level, while exploiting it on some other level.

Faced with a clash, in other words, the PP is sacrificed to the CP: prevented from being polite, we do the next best thing and pretend to be polite.

For Leech, irony is the acceptable face of verbal aggression: it enables us to be offensive while keeping within the limits of socially acceptable behaviour. Moreover, irony can be said to

prevent head-on conflict with one's interlocutor. As Leech himself remarks:

"Whereas an insult can easily lead to a counter-insult, and hence to conflict, an ironic remark is less easy to answer in kind. It combines the art of attack with an apparent innocence which is a form of self-defence."

(Leech, *ibid*: 144)

2) Banter Principle

Irony has been termed mock-politeness: its counterpart, banter, has been termed mock-impoliteness. Leech introduces this term to account for the kind of jokey insults traded among friends (cf. Labov, 1972). The utterance in (28) - which may be said to someone who arrives looking dishevelled - is one of his own examples.

(28) Look what the cat's brought in!

If irony is a friendly way of being offensive, banter is an offensive way of being friendly (Leech, *ibid*: 144). The banter principle has been expressed as follows:

"In order to show solidarity with h, say something which is
(i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to h."

(Leech, *ibid*: 144)

Leech felt the need to introduce the category of banter because he wanted some means of distinguishing between those utterances which are only one step removed from the literal utterance (ironical utterances), and those which are two steps removed (banter). An example of Leech's will illustrate. Consider the utterance in (29).

(29) You're a fine friend.

The utterance in (29) can have at least three possible interpretations, depending on whether the speaker intends her utterance to be taken literally, ironically, or as a case of verbal banter. It can mean:

- 1) You are a fine friend (literal interpretation);
- 2) You are not a fine friend (ironical interpretation, derived from the literal interpretation);
- 3) But, of course, you are my friend, which is why I can talk to you like this, i.e. insult you (banter, derived from ironical interpretation).

In short, banter is an utterance whose ironical meaning is not to be taken at face value, while irony is an utterance whose literal meaning is not to be taken at face value.

In addition to being able to make a formal distinction between utterances on different levels of interpretation, the category of banter enables Leech to distinguish between unserious utterances

which promote familiarity and intimacy and which are considered polite (banter), and unserious utterances which signify superiority and emotional distance and are therefore impolite (irony).

3) Interest Principle

Leech's account of how we interpret hyperbole (overstatement) and litotes (understatement) does not differ from Grice's: it is simply a matter of recognising the fact that the speaker is superficially violating one of the maxims and then arriving at the indirect force of the utterance by means of a conversational implicature. Along with his concern as to why speakers use irony and banter, Leech is also interested in understanding exactly why we might use hyperbole and litotes in our conversation. One important factor, he believes, is the way both overstatement and understatement interact with the PP. According to Leech, we tend to overstate polite beliefs and understate impolite ones. Thus, it is easy to imagine circumstances in which (30) would be appropriate (i.e. polite) if the hearer had cooked the meal, but rather inappropriate (i.e. impolite) if the speaker herself had cooked it.

(30) That was a delicious meal!

Leech has further suggested that we use hyperbole as a means of livening up our conversation. He thus argues for an Interest Principle, which reads as follows:

"Say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting." (Leech, ibid: 146)

This principle might explain how cliches such as (31) and (32) started out.

(31) He's over the moon.

(32) Her eyes were on stalks.

The utterances in (31) and (32) are roughly equivalent to (33) and (34) respectively.

(33) He's very happy.

(34) She's very surprised.

Originally - that is, before they became cliches - a speaker might have been motivated by the interest principle to produce an utterance such as (31) or (32) in preference to its more prosaic counterpart in (33) or (34). Of course today (31) and (32) are also fairly predictable and prosaic, which is one reason why language is continually changing. Speakers are constantly looking for new, and hence more interesting ways, of expressing themselves.

4) Pollyanna Principle

Litotes, on the other hand, is motivated by the Pollyanna Principle, a principle which holds that speakers like to look on

the bright side of life, that is to say, they usually prefer pleasant topics of conversation to unpleasant ones. The negative effect of this is that we tend to temper disagreeable propositions in a way that would be unnecessary if we were saying something agreeable. An example of this is our use of euphemisms. Instead of dying, people are said to 'pass away'; while during the Gulf war, instead of dropping bombs, we were told that pilots were making 'sorties'.

3.1.8. Leech and humour

While Leech is confident about the validity of the politeness maxims, he would be one of the first to admit that his remarks on rhetorical devices such irony, litotes and hyperbole are speculative. In spite of his tentativeness, we will see in the next section of this chapter how these additional principles and maxims can usefully be applied to humorous data. We will find that in spite of his "vexingly idiosyncratic" terminology (Dillon et al, ibid: 456), Leech's extension of the Searle-Grice model has some advantages over that model, and solves some of the problems discussed in the previous chapter.

4.3.1: Humour and the politeness principle: an extension
to the standard maxim-based analysis

In the previous chapter, it was claimed that the exploitation of Grice's maxims and Searle's conditions provided one means of creating a humorous effect. In the ensuing discussion, a number of examples were identified which seemed to fall outside the Searle-Grice model. In this section, I will try to show that these examples can in principle be accounted for if we adopt the broader-based approach proposed by Leech.

Consider again the following.

- (1) A: Now take the whale, that's just about the oldest fish in the ocean.
- B: It isn't a fish. It's a mammal. The whale is a mammal.
- A: Well, the Bible says it's a fish. The oldest book in the world says the whale is a fish.
- B: Look, they just didn't know enough in those days. They had a naive taxonomy. If it swam in the sea, they classified it as a fish. We know better now, we know the whale's a mammal.
- A: You're telling me the author of the Bible didn't know what he was doing? The Bible? The book you swear on in court?

According to Nash, the exchange in (1) constitutes a violation of all Grice's maxims. The flaw in this analysis has already been discussed, when it was demonstrated that violation, if it occurs, does not involve any of the maxims, as they are defined by Grice. On Leech's approach, the dialogue in (1) can be analysed as a violation of one of the politeness maxims. By antagonising one another, both A and B are clearly in breach of the agreement maxim: "minimize disagreement between self and other: maximize agreement between self and other".

The exchange in (2) is another familiar example which appeared to involve violation, while eluding classification along Gricean lines:

(2) Customer: I wondered if you have these in a fourteen?

Assistant: You what? This is a boutique, not the Elephant House.

Again, on Leech's analysis, an explanation can be given for the humour in this example. The shop assistant's insulting reply can be said to represent a violation of the approbation maxim: "minimize dispraise of other: maximize praise of other".

In addition to the examples above which were identified as falling outside the Searle-Grice model, there are those for which Hancher proposes a somewhat ad hoc solution. Remember the Punch

cartoon cited by him in which a couple are sitting at a table over a pot of coffee. The man is looking solemn and pious, prompting his wife to remark:

(3) Will you stop annoying Him? If your coffee is cold, I'll heat it up.

According to Hancher, the rule that is being violated here is the extra regulative rule proposed by Pratt (op. cit.), which requires of us that we do not request anything of a superior unless no one else can grant it.

If we were to adopt Leech's analysis, however, this extra rule would not be necessary. I'll explain why.

The man in the cartoon is appealing to God to reheat his coffee, when either he or his wife could quite easily do it themselves. Now because God is supernatural, he is an extreme case of other, rather like royalty. The wife, on the other hand, is at the other end of the scale; she is almost a case of self. (Remember that self and other are relative terms, with self sometimes being extended to include the speaker's spouse.) So, by appealing to God in preference to his wife, the husband is both annoying God and violating the tact maxim: "minimize cost to other: maximize benefit to other".

A second example for which Hancher proposed a rather arbitrary solution was the cartoon depicting the two men at the diner counter. The man's request for the catsup to be passed was considered inappropriate (it was at the far end of the counter and equidistant from both diners), and therefore comic, because of the existence of yet another regulative rule requiring us not to ask anything of an equal if we could just as easily do it ourselves.

Again, violation of tl - tact maxim can be appealed to here, since the speaker is clearly maximizing benefit to self at great cost to other, whereas if he were adhering to the maxim he would be doing the reverse - that is to say, putting himself out by fetching the catsup and offering it to his eating companion.

It should be appreciated that it is not the requests per se that are in violation of the tact maxim, for if that were the case, all requests would be ruled out by the politeness principle. What makes these two examples comic is the unreasonableness of the requests. The tact maxim is breached in (3) because the request is being made to an inappropriate person, while in the catsup example, the request itself is inappropriate.

3.2.2. Vider applications: the other politeness maxims

So far the application of Leech's approach to communication to the analysis of humorous data has been confined to a consideration of those examples which could not be satisfactorily accounted for on the standard maxim-based approach. We have seen how the agreement maxim, the approbation maxim and the tact maxim have, in turn, come to the rescue of the violation account of humour. It is time now to look further afield and consider the ways in which the other politeness maxims might be similarly exploited.

Victoria Wood's sketches prove a fertile hunting ground for violations of the politeness maxims. Although the approbation maxim is her favourite, she sometimes devotes a whole sketch to the undermining of one of the others. Consider the excerpts in (4). A reporter on a local newspaper has called on the bereaved wife of a popular novelist.

(4) Reporter: Widow Smith? I'm from the 'Herald and Argus'. I believe your husband's just died and he was quite well known or something.

.....

Widow: Come in then, I haven't done much tidying up since

.....

(They go in)

Reporter: Good excuse, a death, isn't it, to bunk off the housework? If somebody dropped dead in our family, I'd be quite pleased.

(She picks up a photo)

This him? He looks quite sick on this actually, doesn't he?

(Tears from the widow)

He looks a dead nice bloke, though. So - he did what exactly, drop dead?

Widow: He collapsed in front of the television.

Reporter: What channel? (Wood, 1985: 43)

According to Leech, the sympathy maxim is so powerful that we refrain from referring explicitly to a sad event such as a death. However, the reporter in (4) goes even further, breaking all the rules about how to treat the bereaved. She does not miss an opportunity of mentioning the death - even to the extent of referring to the bereaved woman as Widow Smith, a highly unusual title in any circumstances. Moreover, the event itself is trivialised beyond belief. The reporter suggests that a death in the family is a good excuse to put off doing household chores; she takes a callous interest in the death scene. Of course the sketch is making a comment about a particularly depraved form of journalism, but it is exaggerated, even by British standards, and is therefore comic.

3.2.3. Politeness maxims are not absolute maxims

Remember that these maxims are observed only "up to a certain point". Leech remarks (Leech, 1983: 133) that the person who applies the approbation maxim too strongly by constantly denigrating herself quickly becomes tedious, and may be regarded as insincere as well.

It would appear that a too-stringent adherence to a politeness maxim can have other effects besides that of boring one's addressee. Leech has emphasised the cultural specificity of his maxims - that is to say, he has acknowledged the fact that what is considered appropriate behaviour varies from one linguistic community to another - using, as an example, the greater importance attached to the modesty maxim in Japan relative to English speaking communities. When offering food, the Japanese are said to be so modest that they avoid making any suggestion that their fare is worth eating, and may even go so far as to deny its very existence. Leech quotes this example:

(5) Nani mo (meshiagaru wa) ari-masen ga, dozo

'There is nothing (to eat), but please

(Leech, *ibid*: 138)

When offering a gift, a similar degree of extreme understatement applies. "Whereas an English person may call his gift 'small',

the Japanese will go further, and say, 'This is a gift which will be of no use to you, but...'" (Leech, *ibid*: 138)

These examples strike me as comic, and, if you think about it, this is precisely what Leech's theory might predict. If we can violate the maxims by not being polite enough, we can overstep the mark and violate the CP by acting in a manner that is so polite it is deemed excessive. Thus, by English speaking standards, (5) is an aberration because the CP has not come into play to keep the PP in check.

So far, then, Leech's extension of the Searle-Grice model has two major advantages over that model. First, with its increased number of maxims, it can cover a wider range of data, including an example cited by Nash which would not otherwise be accounted for. (Moreover, the fact that many humorous utterances appear to derive from the violation of the PP alone, provides independent evidence for the existence of these additional maxims.) Second, the tact maxim obviates the need for the additional, ad hoc regulative rules proposed by Hancher. It thus appears that Leech's approach to communication could form the basis for a violation account of humour that is both broader in scope and less arbitrary than Hancher's account. (Ironically, Leech's own theory has been criticised for its arbitrariness. See, for example, Dillon et al, *op. cit*: 455; Sperber and Wilson, 1986:

3.2.4. Wider applications: humour and the other principles

Besides the PP, the other pragmatic principles introduced by Leech have implications for a theory of humour. We will look at these in turn.

The Irony Principle and the Banter Principle

Because Leech's approach to irony is not fundamentally different from the traditional speech act account, the problem as to how we recover the intended ironical interpretation remains. However, his introduction of the term banter looks promising, and is worth pursuing in a study of verbal humour.

We have seen that Leech makes a distinction between irony, 'a friendly way of being offensive', and banter, 'an offensive way of being friendly'. It is important to understand the difference in function between the two. According to Leech, we use irony to insult and criticise, but in such a way that the risk of counter-attack will be minimized. Because our ironical remarks are friendly (on a superficial level, at least), our addressees will be less inclined, the argument goes, to respond aggressively. As a result, direct conflict is avoided and social interaction goes on.

The function of banter is somewhat different. Banter exists, not to prevent head-on conflict, but to promote and maintain close,

personal relationships. It is seen as a solidarity marker: irony with the sting removed.

Leech emphasises the poisonous aspects of ironical utterances, stating at one point that speakers are "ironic at someone's expense, scoring off others by politeness that is obviously insincere" (Leech, *ibid*: 142). He does not, however, rule out the possibility that irony can be comic (Leech, *ibid*: 143).

As for banter, although it is never deadly serious (the phrase serious banter contains an inherent contradiction), neither is it always particularly comic. The example quoted above, which is cited again below, demonstrates the banality of some instances of banter.

(6) Look what the cat's brought in! (Leech, *ibid*: 144)

It is worth noting further that, on Leech's definition, banter is a fairly restrictive category. Many playfully impolite utterances, which would seem intuitively to qualify as banter do not, in fact, fit Leech's definition, which requires that the utterance is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to b (Leech, *ibid*: 144). The utterance in (7), for example, does not qualify because it is impolite about a third party.

(7) "Sociologists, it is well known, are humourless, left-wing p_uveyors of nonsense or truisms." (Barley, 1986: 9)

The utterance in (8) cannot be categorised as an example of banter either, first, because it is, like (7), impolite about someone other than the hearer; and second, the impolite thought is left implicit, while banter for Leech involves only explicitly conveyed insults.

(8) Bernard: If you could get her to listen to reason...

Jim: She's a sociology student, Bernard!

(Jay and Lynn in Self, 1984: 157)

On the basis of these observations, we may be prompted to ask whether banter is of any use to us in a description of humour, since clearly it does not seem capable of distinguishing in any pertinent way between the comic and the non-comic ironic utterance.

I think its importance lies in its constituting an attempt to identify utterances on different levels of interpretation. We have seen that irony is analysed as being only one step removed from the literal utterance, while banter is two steps removed. In an attempt to recognise formally these different levels of interpretation, Leech uses the terms 'second-order principle' for irony and 'third-order principle' for banter. Leech does not develop this line of thought, and yet we will see in chapter four that there is some mileage in this approach. This basic idea,

when fully developed, forms an integral part of the relevance-theoretic description of humour.

The Interest Principle and the Pollyanna Principle

It will be remembered that the interest principle requires that we enliven our conversation with unpredictable, and hence interesting, comments, while the Pollyanna principle requires us to emphasise the cheerful aspects of life and downplay the negative side. These principles can be linked to hyperbole (overstatement) and litotes (understatement) respectively. Both overstatement and understatement can be comic, as the following examples illustrate.

- (9) The girl was fashionably dressed all in black, with a mask of white make-up, and her hair was expensively contrived to look as if she had just been electrocuted.

(Lodge, 1988: 217, my emphasis)

- (10) Of a man said to have broken up all the furniture, one says "He was a little intoxicated" (Grice, ibid: 71)

3.2.5. The other principles and the notion of violation

It is important to note that the three other principles that have been identified as being relevant to our understanding of humour,

namely the banter, interest and Pollyanna principles, are not like the (first-order) CP and PP, in that they are not violated in order to obtain a comic effect. Indeed, banter could be said to represent a case of violation of the PP: "minimize the expression of impolite beliefs: maximize the expression of polite beliefs"; while the interest and Pollyanna principles, if adhered to in order to create a comic effect, represent a violation of the CP - or, to be more specific - the first maxim of quality: be truthful.

These other principles are not necessary, then, on the descriptive level. Because they are essentially rhetorical devices, they nonetheless pick out a large subset of humorous data, a fact which suggests that their importance lies more in their explanatory role. We will see below that the banter and interest principles, in particular, have implications for a study of humour.

3.2.6. The explanatory nature of Leech's model

On the explanatory level, Leech's model has some advantages also (although, to be fair, neither Hancher nor Yamaguchi made any claims in this respect for their analyses). Although this approach cannot answer the central question - why is utterance x funny? - it may have the built-in apparatus to answer the related question - why do speakers try to be funny? The two principles

involved are the Banter Principle and the Interest Principle. We have already seen that for Leech banter is socially cohesive. Similarly, for Brown and Levinson (op. cit: 129), joking is a "positive-politeness technique", serving the purpose of putting the hearer at her ease. This function of humour (and not simply banter) is particularly well documented by psychologists. Giles et al, for example, give the following as one of the four reasons why a speaker should want to attempt humour:

"Creation or maintenance of in-group solidarity.

In forming a group or interpersonal friendship, humour may serve as an effective alleviation of initial tension which may create an atmosphere conducive for the formulation or evolution of group norms and structures. Even when group cohesiveness has been established, humour may, particularly in times of stress with competing out-groups, serve as a device to maintain in-group solidarity (and 'keep the spirits up')." (Giles et al., 1976: 41).

What Leech has done, then, is to incorporate into his theory what anthropologists and psychologists already know about the social function of humour.

The relevance of the interest principle for a theory of humour is less obvious. Leech has described how we try to beef up our conversation with unpredictable, and hence interesting, utterances. It is this principle, as we have seen, which

explains why we use hyperbole. It seems, however, that the interest principle has implications beyond the fact that hyperbole can often be comic. Remember Hancher's remarks about the relationship between humour and the unconventional. He made the point that humour could result when our expectations are frustrated. Thus puns, when they involve locutionary ambiguity, fail to meet our expectations about the univocality of utterances; and on the illocutionary level, we have looked at many examples where the illocutionary force assigned to an utterance by a speaker takes us completely by surprise. Exploiting the maxims - Leech's and Grice's - is another way of being unpredictable.

There seems to be a connection, then, between unpredictability and humour, and unpredictability and being interesting. Yet there is another piece in this jigsaw. We now know, as advertising copywriters have presumably known all along, that if a television commercial is humorous, viewers take more interest (Brown and Bryant, 1983; Allen, 1988). (Whether they are more likely to remember the name of the product being promoted is another matter. See, for example, Sternthal and Craig (1973) and Brown and Bryant (ibid).) The interest principle provides us with something of an explanation for this phenomenon. The strong connection between being funny and being interesting could be seen to be due to the fact that both are a by-product of unpredictability. Unpredictability, in other words, is one way of being funny, and/or interesting. And since we are well

motivated to be interesting, if only as a means of getting people to listen to us, we are subsequently motivated to try, on occasion, to be funny.

To sum up, Leech's model has some major advantages over the Searle-Grice model, on both a descriptive and an explanatory level. In the final section of this chapter, we will look first at some minor problems which emerge as a result of our adopting Leech's analysis. We will conclude by pulling together the main strands of this, and other, maxim-based approaches, in an attempt to draw up a coherent, descriptively and explanatorily adequate, violation account of humour.

3.3.1. Humour and the politeness principle - discussion

We have seen that one of the advantages of the proliferation of the maxims is that a wider range of humorous data can be accounted for. It might therefore be expected, perhaps, that one disadvantage of the application of Leech's approach to humour will be an exacerbation of the problem of overlapping descriptive categories. Indeed examples can be found to illustrate this. Take the exchange in (1), which, on the revised violation analysis, would be seen as involving the violation of the maxim of relation.

(1) Taxi driver: Have a nice day!

Groucho Marx: I'll have what kind of day I like.

If we were to adopt Leech's model, we could say, alternatively, that in giving such a tendentious response to the poor taxi driver's innocent attempt at leave-taking, Groucho Marx is flouting the agreement maxim.

In spite of this difference in analysis, it is not clear that there is a genuine theoretical problem here. We could argue that two kinds of maxim are simultaneously being exploited in this example: first, the maxim that requires us to be relevant; and second, the maxim that requires us to avoid unnecessary interpersonal conflict. The two maxims are linked, in so far as

the exploitation of the former provides the speaker with the means for exploiting the latter, but there does not seem to be any mutual incompatibility or descriptive overlap.

The problem of overlap discussed in the previous chapter was arguably of a different order in that the exchanges concerned involved a misunderstanding on the part of the hearer, the cause of which was in dispute. For convenience, I will cite the two examples again below.

(2) Violet: Charlie Brown, would you like to come to a party
 next week?

Charlie Brown: Why yes, I'd like that very much.

Violet: I thought you would but I doubt if I'll invite
 you anyway.

(3) A: How would you like to spend seven days in a Portuguese
 villa?

B: I'd love it!

A: Good, then you can envy me all next week.

According to Hancher, Violet is exploiting the illocutionary ambiguity of an indirect speech act in (2), while for Nash, the exchange in (3) involves the exploitation, by A, of Grice's maxim of quantity. These different analyses of what is, strategically, the same joke point to a fundamental difference in opinion as to the root cause of the misunderstanding. For Hancher, the speaker

is exploiting the ambiguity that is inherent in an indirect speech act, while for Nash, the speaker is failing to come up with enough information to enable his addressee to recover his intended meaning.

Perhaps the reason for the difference is as follows. Searle and Grice are treading on the same conceptual territory, concerned, as they are, with the problem of understanding how it is speakers are able to 'mean more than they say'. Combined, it is perhaps inevitable that their descriptions and explanations will involve some overlap. In contrast, Leech is primarily interested in the broader question as to why it is that speakers express themselves indirectly in the first place. Because Leech's maxims are essentially social constraints, they do not directly impinge on the constraints imposed by either Searle or Grice. Indeed, if a speaker violates a pragmatic rule, there is every reason to expect that she might, at the same time, be violating a sociolinguistic rule. In other words, the kind of dual violation illustrated in (1) presents no particular problem, and might even be predicted by the theory.

3.3.2. A proposed extension to the notion of maxim violation

Another issue raised by our adoption of Leech's analysis concerns the status of the principle underlying all these approaches to humour, namely the idea that a humorous effect is obtained when

the maxims or conditions are violated in some way. Having demonstrated how Grice's and Leech's maxims and Searle's conditions can be violated in order to create a comic effect, we now have counterexamples, where an utterance is comic because one of the politeness maxims is applied too strongly. Leech's Japanese examples, where the modesty maxim is applied (by English speaking standards) to excess, are a case in point.

This difficulty was passed over without comment in the previous section, but the question has to be asked as to whether we can accept this extension of the notion of maxim violation. After all, to use the term 'violation' to refer to cases where a maxim is adhered to, albeit too strongly, represents a radical reworking of the concept on which this whole approach to humour is based. I can see two ways of approaching this problem, one of which is more satisfactory than the other.

- 1) It could be argued that while there is a maxim being applied too strongly in the Japanese examples, there is, at the same time, an orthodox violation of the maxim of quality ("be truthful") - and that the CP takes precedence, in a theory of humour, over the PP. There are two objections to this analysis.
 - a) The CP and the PP are seen by Leech as first-order principles, that is to say, they enjoy equal status in his hierarchical structure of principles. To say, for the purpose of a theory of humour, that the CP has primacy over the PP, is not

supported by the theory, and is thus an entirely ad hoc solution to the problem.

b) The humour in the Japanese examples seems to derive from the fact that the speaker is being excessively modest, not from the fact that she is being untruthful. To explain the humour in terms of the latter goes against our intuitions.

2) The alternative solution would be to say that applying a maxim too strongly is a special case of violation. The question then arises: is it only the modesty maxim that is involved, or are the others capable of being exploited in a similar way? It is difficult to see how Grice's maxims of quality, relation and manner could be too strongly applied, while the second maxim of quantity (do not be more informative than is required) already has a control written into it. It seems, therefore, that only the politeness maxims are involved. Consider this example of a speaker applying the approbation maxim ("maximize praise of other: minimize dispraise of other") too strongly. Sidney has erected a worktop over the washing machine in his kitchen and is proudly showing it to Marion, his boss's wife. Marion addresses her husband as follows:

(4) Marion: Darling, Sidney built this shelf on his own. He went out and measured the machine, got all his screws and nails and heavens knows what and built this shelf himself. (Ayckbourn 1977: 27)

Marion's utterance implies that she is impressed by Sidney's achievements. But is this degree of praise justified in the circumstances? Or is Marion making fun of Sidney by praising him in such effusive terms? After all, every weekend, up and down the country, DIY enthusiasts are buying screws and nails and putting up shelves. It is something people do in their spare time, and, one might think, is hardly worth remarking on.

As for applying the agreement maxim too ^tstrongly, there is a nice example in Evelyn Waugh's Scoop. Lord Copper is a newspaper magnate, Mr Salter one of his underlings.

- (5) "Mr Salter's side of the conversation was limited to expressions of assent. When Lord Copper was right he said, 'Definitely, Lord Copper'; when he was wrong, 'Up to a point.'
'Let me see, what's the name of the place I mean? Capital of Japan? Yokohama, isn't it?'
'Up to a point, Lord Copper.'
'And Hong Kong belongs to us, doesn't it?'
'Definitely, Lord Copper.'" (Vaugh, 1988: 14)

To avoid putting someone right on a point of fact when the hearer - a Fleet Street editor - ought to be fully cognizant of the facts, is a rather too stringent application of the agreement maxim, and is therefore comic.

Intentionally or unintentionally, then, the politeness maxims, when applied too strongly, can create a comic effect. 'Because Leech himself has acknowledged that his maxims are adhered to only 'up to a certain point', there does seem to be some justification in saying that, where the politeness maxims are concerned, an extension to the notion of violation is required; that is to say, speakers can violate these maxims by being either under- or over-polite. If this is written into the humour theory, the problem is satisfactorily overcome (note 1).

3.3.3. A more general problem with this approach

Leech's approach is beginning to look promising. It has enabled us to account in a more principled way for examples which, on a standard violation account, were assigned rather arbitrary descriptions. Moreover, it is capable of covering a wider range of data.

There is, however, a more general problem with this, and all other violation approaches to humour. It concerns the very foundation on which the theory is based, namely that a humorous effect is obtained when an utterance is unexpected or unconventional, with violation of the maxims forming an important means of creating this unexpectedness. Certainly unexpectedness does seem to be a distinctive feature of much, if not all, verbal humour, but the question is whether the relationship is causal.

Violation approaches to humour imply that it is, and indeed my own exposition of how Leech's extension of the model might be applied to humour underlines that view. Yet we do not have to look far before we find a range of examples which suggest that this perspective on humour might well be wrong. Let's return to an utterance which was cited at the beginning of this chapter.

(6) I'm sorry to hear about your husband.

I said that it was due to the constraints of the sympathy maxim that (6) would be appropriate if the addressee's husband had just died, and highly inappropriate if he had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature. We saw - remember Wood's bereaved-wife sketch from the previous section - that when the sympathy maxim is violated to create an unexpected response, the utterance is not just inappropriate, it is comic. In the light of this, consider the following exchange.

(7) A: My husband's just won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

B: (said with compassion) Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

The sympathy maxim is clearly being violated by B here to create an unconventional response. Note, however, that unlike the exchanges in the bereaved wife sketch, (7) is not comic. Similarly, consider the exchange in (8).

(8) A: Do you like my new boyfriend.

B: Frankly, no.

B's reply in (8) is unexpected, it represents a violation of the approbation maxim - but again, it isn't funny.

Now we must remember that no-one is claiming that all cases of maxim violation are comic, so, in themselves, the exchanges in (7) and (8) do not threaten the validity of his description. The trouble, as we shall see, is that the counterexamples are commonplace, and there seems to be no means of distinguishing between the humorous and the non-humorous cases of violation.

Nor is it the case that the problem is confined to the politeness maxims. Metaphor, to give another example, represents a violation of one of Grice's maxims, the maxim of quality; and yet, if I say, speaking metaphorically:

(9) Sally is a block of ice

I am unlikely to raise any laughs. Or, to take another example, consider (10).

(10) A: Can you pass the salt?

B: Yes (B does not move).

On Hancher's analysis, B's reply exploits an illocutionary ambiguity (or, on the revised analysis, is a violation of the maxim of relation), - but in many circumstances it would be seen as disconcerting rather than comic. Equally disconcerting, and disorienting, is Lenny's violation of the maxim of relation in this exchange from Pinter's The Homecoming.

(11) Lenny: You must be connected with my brother in some way.

Ruth: I'm his wife.

Lenny: Eh, listen, I wonder if you can advise me. I've been having a bit of a rough time with this clock.

(Pinter, 1970: 28)

We have seen that Hancher does acknowledge the fact that the violation of the maxim of relation is not always comic. The norm must not seriously be called into question: any prolonged lack of co-operation, he argues, can have tragic rather than humorous results.

It is interesting that at this point Hancher comes close to adopting Yamaguchi's view, that there is something superficial about the humour that occurs in humorous utterances. In fact, it is worth looking again at Yamaguchi's more restrictive approach, to see whether it can save us from some of the wrong predictions just outlined.

For Yamaguchi the key word is deception. An utterance is comic not just because the maxims are violated to create an unexpected response: there must also be some deception. In an exchange such as (2), for example, Violet is deceiving Charlie Brown by leading him up the garden path. In contrast, because there is no such deliberate deception in, say, the use of metaphor, an example such as (9) would automatically be ruled out as a candidate for humour. So far, so good. Unfortunately for Yamaguchi, however, deceptive violation also occurs in non-humorous utterances. In fact, the technique is used frequently by advertising copy-writers. Consider the following.

(12) We're giving away half our furniture for Christmas.

(Advertisement for Habitat)

This eye-catching copy leads us to believe that Habitat is giving away half its furniture for nothing, but on close reading of the rest of the text in the advertisement - which I have not included here - we realise that this is not the case. What they are doing is selling off (selected items of) furniture at half price. The advertisement is effective because it grabs our attention by means of semi-deceptive violation of the maxim of quality.

This attention-grabbing technique, as I have said, is widely used. Another example can be found in (13), an advertisement from a Sunday supplement, inviting readers to take out a subscription on someone's behalf. (See also Wilson, 1992)

(13) Give 'The Observer' for a year and we'll award you the
Booker Prize.

In (13) we are momentarily deceived into thinking that by taking out a subscription to 'The Observer' we will be awarded that dubious accolade, the Booker Prize. But, as with the previous example, a second reading (or a close reading of the small print), forces the conclusion that what is being offered is not the Booker Prize itself, but the copy of the book which wins the Booker Prize.

Of course, we are not really being deceived in these examples, any more than we are truly deceived in the garden-path jokes discussed by Yamaguchi. This is an important point. It looks as though advertisers obtain their effects by using the same techniques as those used by the writers of comedy, an observation which leads us by another route to the same question: what exactly is the link between maxim violation and humour creation?

The picture that seems to be emerging is one where some cases of maxim violation are comic, while others aren't. And although no-one is claiming that maxim violation is a defining feature of the comic utterance, it is important to develop some means of distinguishing between the comic and the non-comic cases of violation. Unless we can do this, the link between maxim violation and humour creation is too tenuous to be useful as an analytical tool.

3.3.4. The importance of speaker intentions

Perhaps the answer to this problem lies in an observation made in the introduction. In this and the previous chapter, the impression might have been given that an utterance is either humorous or non-humorous. Indeed Hancher and Yamaguchi implicitly adopt this view and, in extending the violation approach to include Leech's maxims, this assumption has not been challenged. However, the point was made at the outset that an utterance is not intrinsically comic, that for every so-called 'comic' utterance, it is possible to construct a context which would render that utterance humourless. An adequate theory of humour, it was argued, should be able to give an account of all intentional verbal humour; that is to say, the aim of this study is to provide a means of distinguishing between the exchange in (14) when humour is intended, and that same exchange when the shop assistant is intending to offend and insult.

(14) Customer: I wondered if you have these in a fourteen?

Assistant: You what? This is a boutique, not the Elephant House.

The answer, it seems, would be to say that maxim violation is comic if humour is intended. To build this proviso into the definition excludes examples (7) to (13) - assuming, for the sake of argument, that humour is not intended in these examples - but the question remains: is this a useful theoretical tool? After

all, it does not take us much further than a statement claiming that an utterance is comic if the speaker intends it that way.

In the second section of the next chapter we will look at humour from a different perspective. It will be suggested that the basic assumption underpinning all speech act accounts of humour might well be wrong. In other words, the causal relationship that is thought to exist between maxim violation and the creation of verbal humour might itself be a garden path. But before we look at this alternative view of verbal humour, we need to know something about the approach to communication from which it stems. The first section of the next chapter, then, is an introduction to relevance theory.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABANDONING THE MAXIMS

4.1.1. Relevance theory: the beginnings

Wilson and Sperber reacted against the readiness, shown by Leech and others, to create new maxims on what they saw to be a completely ad hoc basis (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 36). In their early work, they sought to show that instead of extending the maxims, they could be reduced - to one single maxim of relation (Wilson and Sperber, 1981). (The Wilson-Sperber model, as it stands today, is against the whole maxim-based framework.) We will look at the sort of data that led them to this conclusion. Consider the exchange in (1).

(1) Jane: (with a wail) I just want to go to bed.

Sidney: Well you cannot go to bed. Not at eighteen forty seven.

Now take off that coat. (Ayckbourn, 1977: 35)

On a Gricean approach, Sidney's utterance might be analysed as a violation of the maxim of quantity, since by stating the time so precisely he is - on one level - giving more information than is

necessary to make his point. It could be argued, however, that Sidney's utterance constitutes a violation of the maxim of relation, for, in the circumstances, the precise time is simply not relevant. (We have seen the problems that this overlap has caused for an adequate violation account of humour.)

Next consider again this conversation from a 'Peanuts' cartoon strip.

(2) Lucy: Schroeder, why don't you give up this classical music thing? Don't you know there are over eighty million piano students in this country? And less than one per cent of them ever make a real living at it?

Schroeder: Where did you get those figures?

Lucy: I just made them up.

Following Hancher, we analysed (2) as a violation, on Lucy's part, of the maxim of quality. To supply false information, and then to admit, quite readily, that it is false when challenged, could equally be seen as a violation of the maxim of relation. After all, Lucy's remarks are worthless (that is to say, irrelevant) when we know that there is no factual evidence to support them.

Consider finally this violation of the maxim of manner.

- (3) Cumulo-nimbus stacked up outside; Treece always associated it with the provinces. (Bradbury, 1978: 13)

This is an extract from a novel, not a geography text book. The author has used the technical, Latinate term cumulo-nimbus for stylistic reasons. We might infer that Treece is something of a pedant, or the sort of person who prides himself on his extensive vocabulary and wide general knowledge. Whatever the intended implications, Bradbury has violated the maxim of manner here in order to produce a (mildly) comic effect. But could it not be argued, once again, that it is the maxim of relation that is being exploited? Is the correct terminology for a certain type of cloud formation crucial (that is to say, relevant) in this context?

Starting from this rather nebulous position - after all, relevance (as Grice was the first to admit) was not then a clearly defined category - Wilson and Sperber set about developing their own pragmatic theory. It is called, predictably, Relevance Theory. The main tenets of relevance theory are set out below. (For a more comprehensive presentation of the theory, see Sperber and Wilson (1986) or Blakemore (1992); for an outline, see Sperber and Wilson (1987) or Wilson and Sperber (1990). For criticism, see Sperber and Wilson (1987, second section) and reviews (Mey and Talbot, 1988; Nemo, 1988; Levinson, 1989).

4.1.2. Relevance theory: the basic premise

According to Wilson and Sperber we do not go round taking in information indiscriminately; rather we pay attention to phenomena that strike us as relevant. This might seem a rather obvious point to make, let alone base a theory on, but as Wilson and Sperber have shown, this simple fact does have implications for communication. Their argument goes something like this. When we speak, we are claiming someone's attention, and when we are addressed, we tune in, in most circumstances, to what is being said. Now if it is the case that we only pay attention to relevant stimuli, it follows, that as hearers we must automatically assume that utterances addressed to us are relevant. It is this assumption, claim Wilson and Sperber, that explains how we are able to interpret utterances in context.

4.1.3. Relevance defined

We all have fairly strong intuitions as to whether or not an utterance is relevant, and the fact that we have these intuitions is crucial to the theory. For example, (4b) would probably be considered a relevant response to (4a), while (4c) would, in many circumstances, be considered totally irrelevant, and therefore inappropriate.

- (4) a. What time does the train leave?
b. 6.30.
c. Iron is the most widely used metal.

This ordinary language notion of relevance is a useful starting point, but too vague to be of any use in an adequate pragmatic theory. Wilson and Sperber define relevance more precisely. For them, an utterance is relevant if it interacts with the context in a particular way - that is to say, if it has contextual implications or, more generally, contextual effects. To understand what they mean by this, we will need to look at the three ways in which new information can interact with the context to produce a contextual effect.

First consider the scenario in (5).

- (5) The doorbell rings. I think to myself:
a. If it's the milkman, I'll pay the bill.
I open the door and:
b. It is the milkman.

New information, (5b), has interacted with the context, (5a), to yield some further information, (5c):

- (5) c. I'll pay the bill.

To put it another way, the information in (5b) has implications in the context of (5a) because some new information, (5c), has been obtained which could not be deduced from either (5a) or (5b) alone.

Next consider this scenario.

- (6) The doorbell rings. I think to myself:
- a. It must be the milkman. If it is, I'll pay the bill.
I open the door and:
 - b. It is the milkman.

In this example, there is an assumption in (6a), 'It's the milkman', which is raised from hypothesis to certainty by the information in (6b). It can combine with the information, 'If it's the milkman, I'll pay the bill' to yield the contextual assumption in (6c):

- (6) c. I'll pay the bill.

Finally consider (7).

- (7) The doorbell rings. I think to myself:
- a. It must be the milkman. If it is, I'll pay the bill.
I open the door and:
 - b. It isn't the milkman.

Here the new information in (7b) has a contextual implication because it leads to the abandoning of an assumption - namely, 'it's the milkman' - in the context (7a).

These different scenarios, which are based on Wilson and Sperber's own examples (Wilson and Sperber, 1986), represent the three ways in which new information can interact with the context to produce a contextual effect. They can be summarised thus.

New information can:

- 1) combine with the context to yield a further piece of information;
- 2) strengthen an existing assumption;
- 3) eradicate an existing assumption.

And according to Wilson and Sperber, these are precisely the ways in which an utterance can achieve relevance.

4.1.4. Relevance is a comparative concept

It is important to remember that relevance is a comparative concept. In other words, one utterance or item of information may be more relevant in a specified context than another.

Compare, for example, the following.

(8) A: What time does the train leave?

B: 6.30.

(9) A: What time does the train leave?

B: 6.30 and iron is the most widely used metal.

Prima facie B's reply in (8) is more relevant than B's reply in (9). According to Wilson and Sperber, this is because relevance is a function, not only of contextual effects, but also of processing effort. In processing information, hearers look for the greatest possible effect for the minimum necessary effort. The response in (9) contains information which costs the hearer some processing effort with no reward in the form of an extra contextual effect (if all A wants to know is the departure time of the train in question), and as a result, is less relevant than the response in (8).

It is on the basis of the above observations that Wilson and Sperber propose the following (simplified) definition of relevance:

"Relevance:

- (a) Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance.
- (b) Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance." (Wilson and Sperber, 1986: 11)

4.1.5. The presumption and the principle of relevance

Now that we have a definition of relevance, we can proceed to expand on the claim made above, namely that we are only able to interpret what is said to us by assuming that the person addressing us intends her utterance to be relevant.

When we speak, we convey two layers of information:

- 1) the information conveyed by the utterance;
- 2) the information that the speaker intends to convey that information.

These are the contents of the speaker's informative and communicative intentions respectively. As part of 1), speakers communicate, by the very act of requesting their addressee's attention, the information that what they have to say is worth processing. Communication is only possible because hearers (in general) look for an interpretation which would confirm this. This piece of information, which is automatically communicated by every utterance, is known as the presumption of relevance. The following example, from a previous chapter, will illustrate.

- (10) A: Do you want to see 'Hedda Gabler' tonight?
B: I went yesterday.

In processing B's reply, A takes the proposition expressed and attempts to access a context in which it would be worth processing (presumption of relevance). In this case, the context

would include the information that people do not usually want to see the same play two nights running. Thus A is able to extract the information that B does not want to see 'Hedda Gabler'. She might then make the hypothesis that B does not want to see 'Hedda Gabler' because he saw it the previous night, and thus extract an explanation for B's not wanting to see it. And the utterance, on this interpretation, might well be worth the effort A has spent in processing it.

The essential difference between this and the Searle-Grice approach is as follows. On a Gricean analysis, A recognises that the maxim of relation is potentially being violated and looks around for an interpretation of B's response that will restore his belief that the maxims are being adhered to at some deeper level. For relevance theorists, rule violation is not possible, simply because there aren't any rules in the first place. Utterances automatically create expectations of relevance because of the way the mind works. This fact is stated in the single general principle around which relevance theory is built:

"Principle of relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Wilson and Sperber, 1986: 158).

This is a more technical way of saying that every utterance creates an expectation of its own optimal relevance. An interpretation which satisfies that expectation, or which the

speaker might rationally have expected to do so, is consistent with the principle of relevance. Sperber and Wilson claim that every utterance has at most a single interpretation which is consistent with the principle of relevance, and this is the interpretation that the hearer should rationally choose.

4.1.6. Optimal relevance

Optimal relevance is a new term which needs to be defined if we are to get any further in our understanding of relevance theory. Material is optimally relevant if it is relevant enough to be worth processing. But how relevant is 'relevant enough'? The answer to this is best tackled by addressing two further questions:

- 1) How much do hearers expect in the way of contextual effects?
- 2) How much effort can they be expected to make?

The answer to the first question is that the effects have to be adequate, that is, the information conveyed has to be as much as we were entitled to expect, and more relevant than any other information we could have been processing at the time. It is easy to see that when it comes to contextual effects, our expectations vary from one situation to another. For example, if an acquaintance asks me, at the bus-stop, how I am feeling these days, he is not entitled to expect more than a few words on the

topic. On the other hand, the same question from my G.P. in her surgery, would probably elicit a more detailed response. The difference is, quite simply, that of a polite enquiry as opposed to a request for a justification of one's presence. We all have fairly strong intuitions about how much detail is expected of us in a given context, and most of us get it more or less right most of the time. (We will be looking later, however, at situations where hearers' expectations are not fulfilled.)

The effort side of the definition of optimal relevance says that the intended effects should be produced for the minimum justifiable processing effort. From this it follows that an utterance whose effects could have been more economically produced is not optimally relevant: so to find an optimally relevant interpretation, the hearer would have to find some extra contextual effects, which could not have been more economically communicated by any other utterance. We will return to this point in the discussion below on the role of implicatures.

The basic claim of relevance theory, then, is that every utterance creates in the hearer an expectation of optimal relevance: an expectation, that is, of adequate effects, achieved for no unjustifiable effort, in a way the speaker could manifestly have foreseen. Having found an interpretation which bears out that expectation - or which the speaker might rationally have expected to do so - he need look no further. The

first such interpretation is the only such interpretation, and is the only one the hearer should choose.

On the relevance-theoretic approach, all this is achieved without recourse to any maxims of communication. I shall look now at some of the implications of relevance theory for the topics dealt with in chapters 1 - 3.

4.1.7. Applications of relevance theory

One advantage of Wilson and Sperber's theory is that it attempts to explain, not only how speakers succeed in communicating, but why they sometimes choose to express themselves implicitly, ironically, euphemistically, vaguely, and so on. We will look now at the relevance-theoretic account of some of these aspects of communication, and draw some comparisons, where appropriate, with both Leech's and the Searle-Grice accounts.

4.1.8. The role of implicatures

We have seen that Leech, in common with Wilson and Sperber, wanted to understand not only how we are able to recover implied material, but why we should express ourselves implicitly in the first place. He came up with the idea that in order to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, speakers often choose

to express 'impolite' thoughts (thoughts that are unfavourable to the addressee) indirectly, that is, through implicature. All the politeness maxims are derived from this basic idea. As I have already explained, Leech did not ignore the fact that the need to be polite varies from one context to the next, the two main factors affecting our adherence to the maxims being:

- 1) cultural norms;
- 2) the relationship between speaker and addressee (self and other).

The closer that relationship, the argument goes, the less need there is to be polite. It would follow from this, although Leech does not spell it out, that speech between intimates is characterised by less circumlocution, that is to say an avoidance of the use of implicatures.

Wilson and Sperber approach the question of the role of implicatures from a completely different perspective. For them, their use is linked to the notions effort and effect. Because processing utterances requires effort on the part of the hearer, Wilson and Sperber believe that any material that can be taken for granted between speaker and addressee should be left implicit. If the hearer is put to some extra linguistic effort to process material which he could have supplied for himself, something, they argue, is wrong. Consider the exchange in (11), and compare it with (12).

(11) He: Would you like some coffee?

She: Coffee would keep me awake.

(12) He: Would you like some coffee?

She: No, I wouldn't. Coffee would keep me awake.

In (11) the speaker implies that she does not want any coffee, and gives an explicit reason for this, namely that it would keep her awake. In (12), the same information is conveyed, but both the refusal, and the reason for the refusal, are made explicit. According to Wilson and Sperber, the response in (12), which costs the hearer more linguistic processing effort, would be optimally relevant only in circumstances where the hearer could not be trusted to work out for himself that the speaker did not want to stay awake, and might therefore misunderstand the utterance without this piece of information being made explicit. In other words, a speaker aiming at optimal relevance should leave implicit everything that she trusts the hearer to be able to supply with less effort than it would take him to process an explicit prompt.

Leech might account for the use of the implicature in the response in (11) on the grounds that it is polite to give a reason for refusing an offer. What is not clear is which of the politeness maxims is involved. The agreement maxim ("maximize agreement with other; minimize disagreement with other") comes

nearest. We could modify this maxim slightly and say that refusing an offer is one way of disagreeing with one's interlocutor. I don't think this is too wild a claim. Indeed, there is sometimes little difference between disagreeing and refusing. Consider (13).

(13) A: You want coffee, don't you?

B: I don't think I do.

In (13) A could be said to be making an offer, but at the same time he is inviting agreement. B refuses the offer, while doing her best to minimize disagreement, that is to say, she is adhering to the agreement maxim. I think that it is uncontentious to suggest that - other things being equal - the response in (13) is more polite than the response in (14), in which B appears to be flouting the agreement maxim.

(14) A: You want coffee, don't you?

B: No, certainly not.

Suppose, however, that the reply in (11) was intended to imply an acceptance of the offer of coffee. (In certain circumstances, this would be a possible interpretation.) While Leech's agreement maxim can be modified to accommodate the giving of reasons for refusing offers ("if you must refuse an offer, you are less likely to cause offence if you do so indirectly, through implicature"), it is not so easy to explain how the giving of

reasons for accepting offers represents, also, an adherence to this, or any other of his maxims. In fact, it could be argued that to accept an offer amounts to a case of maxim violation, since it implies benefit to self at the expense of other. (The tact maxim requires of us that we maximize benefit to other, not the other way round.)

This well-known Sperber-Wilson exchange has proved somewhat problematic for Leech. What has been highlighted is a rigidity in his approach which does not allow for the wide range of interpretations that can be assigned to a single utterance. It seems to be the case that if speakers and hearers 'keep to the rules' (that is to say, if they keep to his rules), meaning can be accounted for. As soon as they transgress, as, for example, when the response in (11) is intended as an acceptance rather than a refusal, problems arise. If relevance theory fares better - and I believe that it does - this is because it operates on a higher level of generality. The principle of relevance applies, and provides the key to the meaning of an utterance, whatever is intended by the speaker. It is in this respect that relevance theory constitutes a radical break from other pragmatic theories.

4.1.9. The use of implicatures and the speaker-hearer
relationship

Implicatures, for Sperber and Wilson, fall into two classes: implicated (i.e. intended) contextual assumptions, and implicated (i.e. intended) contextual effects. Implicatures, then, are the contextual assumptions and contextual effects that the hearer is expected to recover in his search for an optimally relevant interpretation.

It follows that for Wilson and Sperber, as for Leech, there is a connection between the use of implicatures and the relationship between speaker and hearer. Consider the following exchanges.

(15) He: I need to get hold of Hugo. Do you know where he is?
She: Where he usually is after a hard day.

(16) He: I need to get hold of Hugo. do you know where he is?
She: He's in the 'Bricklayers' Arms'.

In (15) the speaker knows that she can leave Hugo's exact whereabouts implicit. Her response is an economical one, enabling her to supply, not only the information requested, but an additional reminder as to where Hugo can usually be contacted in the evening. It may even be the case that in responding in the way she does the speaker is also expressing her attitude to

Hugo's lifestyle. In (16), on the other hand, only the information that is asked for is supplied, and made explicit.

We have already seen that speakers should leave implicit material that can be taken for granted, in order to save their addressees undue processing effort: the fact that they can communicate implicitly in the first place - without fear of communication failure - is a function of the speaker-hearer relationship. Conversely, the more that has to be explicitly spelled out, the greater the implied distance - in knowledge, abilities or sympathies - between speaker and hearer. Here I will give just one example. Consider the following.

(17) He: I need to speak to Hugo. Do you know where he is?

She: He's in the 'Bricklayers' Arms'. That's a public house. It's just down the road from here, on the left.

In (17) we have a response that is at the opposite end of the spectrum from (15). Nothing is taken for granted here; the speaker even takes some trouble to rule out the possible interpretation that Hugo is cradled in the arms of a bricklayer. If the reply in (15) is a marker of some intimacy, the reply in (17) is a marker of a lack of intimacy - as a result, perhaps, of linguistic and cultural difference. (For this approach to implicatures based on stylistic choices, see Sperber and Wilson, 1986, chapter 4, section 6.)

It is interesting to note that Wilson and Sperber's reasoning has caused them to emphasise a quite different aspect of the use of implicatures. For Leech, remember, the overriding motivation for their use is politeness; that is, he sees them as a device enabling speakers to convey 'impolite thoughts' to people they do not know well enough to speak to in a more direct way. Wilson and Sperber, on the other hand, emphasise their role in improving efficiency. Because greater efficiency can be achieved by leaving implicit material that can be taken for granted, and since more can be taken for granted between people who know each other well, it follows that for Wilson and Sperber, speech between intimates is typically characterised by more, not less, implicitly conveyed material.

4.1.10. Implicatures and vagueness

Wilson and Sperber do not claim that the only reason for the use of implicatures is increased efficiency. They argue that often something is lost by spelling out the implicatures of an utterance, because implicatures are weak and indeterminate in a way that explicit communication isn't. One reason for implicating is to avoid hurting or upsetting one's addressee. This point can be illustrated by looking again at an example from chapter three. Remember that, according to Leech, the sympathy maxim ("minimize antipathy between self and other: maximize sympathy between self and other") prevents us from referring

explicitly to a sad event such as a death. As a result, (18) was considered to be more appropriate than (19) if the addressee's husband has just died.

(18) I'm sorry to hear about your husband.

(19) I'm sorry to hear about your husband's death.

Wilson and Sperber would account for the greater appropriacy of (18) on the grounds that the speaker is attempting to divert her hearer from looking into the encyclopedic entry for 'death', with all the pain that this entails. In other words, the speaker of (18) is being deliberately vague in order to make the painful implicatures that would be derived from (19) less accessible. It should, of course, be appreciated that the speaker of (18) would have to be confident that her addressee would know what she was referring to: it is the fact that the hearer can be trusted to arrive at the intended interpretation which enables the speaker to convey her condolences euphemistically in the first place.

The problem with Leech's analysis is that it lacks explanatory adequacy. The sympathy maxim explains the greater appropriacy of (18) over (19) on the grounds that the speaker is politely suppressing the expression of an thought which is unfavourable to the hearer, and while this analysis holds good for the expression of sad, potentially distressing, thoughts, it cannot explain why congratulations (that is, a thought which is favourable to the

hearer) might be alluded to in similarly vague terms. Compare (20) with (21) below. Assume that in both instances Norma's husband has just been re-elected Prime Minister.

(20) Oh Norma, I was so pleased to hear about your husband.

(21) Oh Norma, I was so pleased to hear that your husband has
been re-elected Prime Minister.

Leech has mentioned that an utterance such as (20) would normally be interpreted as a congratulation, and on many occasions it would be seen as more appropriate than the spelled-out version in (21). But why is the speaker suppressing the overt expression of a thought that is favourable to the hearer? The sympathy maxim, which requires that we maximize expressions of sympathy between self and other, would surely predict that (21), because it makes explicit the favourable thought, would be preferable to (22). ✓

On a relevance-theoretic model, the analysis of (20) partly mirrors that of (18). If the event referred to can be assumed, the speaker can leave this part of the message implicit. Moreover, by leaving implicit the event in question, the speaker is able to create some intimacy ("I know that you know what I am talking about, because I know how important it is to you that your husband succeeds...."). This part of the message is only weakly communicated, and may be absent altogether on some interpretations, but the point is that relevance theory can

account for these vaguer effects while Leech fails to recognise their existence.

4.1.11. A relevance-theoretic account of irony

We have seen that many speech act theorists subscribe to the standard view of irony, in which the utterance meaning is the opposite of what the sentence means literally. This description of irony was found to be inadequate - remember the 'Peanuts' cartoon strip cited in chapter two. Wilson and Sperber have identified other weaknesses in the traditional account (Wilson and Sperber, 1988). To take an example, they have shown that to succeed as irony an ironical quotation has to be recognised as a quotation. Consider the famous utterance in (22).

(22) The Health Service is safe in our hands.

(Margaret Thatcher)

Uttered with derision, that is to say, ironically, by a political commentator, (22) could convey (roughly) the contradictory of what the utterance means literally, namely:

(23) The Health Service is not safe in the hands of the
Conservatives.

If this were all there was to the ironical interpretation of (22), the speech act account would be perfectly adequate. However, the ironical interpretation conveys some additional information that is not present when the sentence is uttered non-ironically: that Margaret Thatcher cannot be relied on to keep her word. Depending on the context, it may also convey the information that no publicly funded body is safe with the Conservatives, or that the Conservative Party is an uncaring party, willing to put short-term profit before the needs of sick people.

Irony is an efficient vehicle for the expression of attitude, but for us to recover the opinions expressed in (22), when it is quoted ironically, we have to recognise that there is an original, Margaret Thatcher's utterance, which is being ridiculed. The standard view of irony cannot capture this important feature of the ironical quotation, unlike the Wilson-Sperber view, which, as we will see, is ideally suited.

Wilson and Sperber have identified several other types of utterance where the standard definition of irony breaks down. I do not want to discuss them here; instead the interested reader should refer to the paper mentioned above. More important for our purpose is the alternative view outlined by them.

To understand the relevance-theoretic account of irony, we must understand the distinction, introduced by Wilson and Sperber,

between descriptive and interpretive uses of utterances. Put simply, a descriptively used utterance represents a state of affairs, while an interpretively used utterance represents a thought attributed to someone other than the speaker (or the speaker in the past). Compare (24) with (25).

(24) A: What is her name?

B: Her name is Caroline.

(25) A: What did she say?

B: That her name is Caroline.

The reply in (24) is an example of an utterance used descriptively, while the reply in (25) is an example of an utterance used interpretively. It is not difficult to understand the distinction. The former is a matter of saying what is the case, the latter of reporting what someone else says is the case. Interpretively used utterances have two functions. They can be used to report, or they can be used to echo, what someone else has said. B's response in (25) is a case of reporting, while in (26) it is said to be echoic.

(26) A: That was a delicious meal.

B: Yes, a delicious meal.

Echoic utterances not only represent a thought attributed to someone else, they also express the speaker's attitude to that

thought. On one interpretation, B is endorsing in (26) the opinion held by A, namely that the meal was a delicious one. On another interpretation, she could be said to be distancing herself from that opinion, and expressing, instead, the view that the meal was far from delicious. Ironical utterances are a subset of this second type of echoic utterance, in which speakers convey their disagreement or disapproval of the thought or opinion expressed.

Let's return to the utterance in (22) above. As a case of irony, it fits Wilson and Sperber's definition quite neatly, since it is recognisably echoic (it represents an utterance attributed to someone else) and dissociative (it conveys the speaker's attitude as one of disagreement and ridicule of the opinion echoed).

In some cases of irony, however, the echoic element is less tangible. Consider Searle's example, the ironical (27), uttered to someone who has just broken a priceless vase.

(27) That was a brilliant thing to do.

(27) is clearly dissociative in that the speaker is distancing herself from the view that the addressee has done something clever. But in what sense can it be said to be echoic?

According to Wilson and Sperber, echoic utterances do not have to echo actual utterances or thoughts; they can echo the sort of utterances or thoughts that might be expected to occur. Ironical

interpretations are often echoic in this sense. Of course, an ironical interpretation is appropriate (i.e. relevant) in a context very different from the context in which a non-ironical interpretation would be appropriate. For instance, if the person being addressed in (27) managed to piece together the priceless vase with super-glue, leaving no visible cracks, the same utterance could be uttered with no ironical overtones whatsoever. In recognising the irony, we construct a context, however vague, in which the utterance might be non-ironically intended, and it is this contrast, between the real and the imagined contexts, that provides us with the echoic element that is present in all ironical utterances. (Again, there are implications here for a description of humour.)

4.1.12. Weaker effects of communication

There are times when utterances have well-defined, highly salient interpretations, as, for example, in the straightforward exchange of information:

(28) A: What's the capital of France?

B: Paris.

Many exchanges are unlike (28) in that their interpretations are much vaguer. We have seen, for example, that speakers may prefer to talk in vague terms when referring to a taboo topic such as

death. Sometimes, however, it will not be so transparently obvious why a speaker chooses to communicate through implicature. Consider the following exchange.

(29) A: Would you like to visit China?

B: I don't want to visit any foreign country.

The response in (29) certainly implies:

(30) The speaker (B) does not want to visit China.

However, if B had merely wanted to convey the information in (30), she could have saved her hearer some processing effort and replied as follows:

(31) No, I don't want to visit China.

So why did B respond in the way that she did? Wilson and Sperber have pointed out that responses such as the one in (29) convey weakly implicated material, which may be reconstructed in different ways by different hearers. From B's response in (29), for example, the hearer might draw any of the following (weakly implicated) conclusions:

- (32) The speaker is a singularly unadventurous person;
- (33) The speaker is xenophobic or fiercely nationalistic;
- (34) The speaker is agoraphobic or has a fear of travelling;
- (35) The speaker is a workaholic who does not take holidays.

Which of (32)-(35) did the speaker intend to communicate? We cannot say for certain, as we could in the case of (30). What we can say is that the speaker, by answering in this way, gave some degree of encouragement to the hearer to think along these lines. The greater the range of possible interpretations, the weaker the implications will be.

These weakly implicated assumptions pose something of a theoretical problem. According to speech act theory, successful communication has to do with the complete recovery of the speaker's intended meaning. Because none of the implicatures (32)-(35) is, in any strict sense, necessary for the understanding of B's reply in (29), speech act theory would have difficulty dealing with this type of case.

Relevance theory takes a broader approach to communication. Wilson and Sperber believe that hearers can achieve only an approximation of the speaker's thoughts, not an exact replica. They would argue that there is no definite cut-off point to distinguish between that which the hearer can or cannot

legitimately infer, and as a result, they are able to accommodate within their framework this weakly implicated material.

* * * * *

A great many utterances seem to depend for their effect on the fact that they convey a very wide range of weak implicatures. Consider again an utterance cited in chapter one.

(36) I never think that people die - they must go to department stores.

My interpretation of (36) is given below.

(37) Instead of worshipping God, people (Americans?) today worship money and possessions. If spending is their idea of bliss, then paradise is a trip to Macy's, or Harrod's.

People (Americans?) find it difficult to accept the finality of death. It is comforting to think of it as a kind of extended shopping trip. After all, people can be expected to return from the shops. (cf. Woody Allen's comment: "I don't believe in an afterlife - although I am bringing a change of underwear.")

How similar is my interpretation to yours, and how closely does it reflect what Varhol actually intended? The answer to both

questions is that it doesn't matter all that much. What is important is that we get the general drift of Warhol's message, that is to say, his jokey, but critical, comment on the value system of western industrialised society. I think you will agree that his utterance is more potent than my laborious explanation, and further, that these additional effects can be analysed as a wide range of implicatures which the hearer is licensed to explore.

Many ironical utterances are similarly open to analysis in terms of weak implicatures. Consider again (22) above. As an ironical quotation this utterance enables the speaker to ridicule the very idea that the Health Service is safe in the hands of the Conservatives. I have already mentioned that in addition to this strongly implied material, various weakly implicated conclusions might also be drawn. In other words, the ironical interpretation is capable of conveying an indeterminate range of assumptions - and is all the more effective for that. Indeed, the fact that ironical utterances have this potential means that irony is a highly efficient vehicle for the expression of attitude, and this, in turn, provides us with a rationale for the existence of irony in the first place.

We saw, in a previous chapter, that indeterminacy of expression, as a feature of verbal humour, is a problem for speech act theorists. The above discussion demonstrates that vagueness is a

characteristic of many other types of utterance. Relevance theory has a clear advantage over speech act theory in that it can provide us with an account of these vaguer aspects of communication.

4.1.13. Non-verbal communication and cognition

I want to make two final points before we look at humour in relation to relevance theory.

First, Wilson and Sperber have shown that communication is possible without the use of a code, e.g. language. (I am not talking about the use of gestures which may be a codified form of behaviour.) Consider, for example, the following:

- (38) A: Where are you going for your holidays this year?
B: (Produces a brochure advertising self-catering scuba diving holidays in the Seychelles.)

There is no code which says that showing someone a travel brochure means:

- (39) I am going on a self-catering scuba diving holiday in the Seychelles

but A can nonetheless work out that this is what B intended her actions to convey, as it is the only interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

Just in case it might be argued that a brochure naming a holiday destination can be used to signify the destination itself (in which case we would be dealing with a codified form of behaviour), compare (38) with (40)

(40) A: Where are you going for your holidays this year?

B: (Produces a Homebase catalogue.)

It is unlikely that B would infer from this that A is planning to spend her holidays in the local DIY superstore. He may infer, however, that B is intending to decorate her house over the holiday, since this would be the optimally relevant interpretation in the circumstances.

I think the different interpretations placed on (38) and (40) prove that the ability to draw inferences is crucial to human communication, while the use of a code can sometimes be dispensed with.

Second, it is worth remembering that relevance theory is a theory, not only of communication but of cognition (i.e. what we know and can take in). In other words, this predilection we have to pay attention to phenomena that strike us as relevant is a

general purpose feature of our cognitive make-up which enables us to make sense, not only of utterances addressed to us, but of all stimuli or phenomena. This is important because we can laugh, quietly, on our own, at something that just happens to strike us as comic. We might also laugh at an utterance in which humour was not intentionally communicated.

These two final points have been made because it was stated at the outset that in principle relevance theory should be capable of accounting for all humour, be it intentional or unintentional, verbal or non-verbal. It is these two aspects of relevance theory which encompass that broader aim, although, as I have already stated, this thesis is concerned exclusively with verbal humour. In the next and final section of this chapter we will develop a relevance-theoretic account of verbal humour.

4.2.1. A relevance-theoretic approach to humour (1)

We have seen that for Raskin (ibid) joke telling constitutes a non-bona-fide communication. What he means by this is that when we tell a joke we are not bound by the same linguistic conventions that apply in bona-fide discourse. The effect on the addressee is that expectations are subsequently altered. On recognising the utterance as a joke, the hearer will abandon any assumptions she might have as to the truth or relevance - in Gricean terms - of the information conveyed (note 1).

Searle, like Raskin, noted that there is something unorthodox about our use of language when telling a joke. For him, it is a 'parasitic' form of communication, along with practising pronunciation, play acting, and so on (Searle, 1969). Yamaguchi (ibid) adopts a modified version of Raskin's approach, with his view that joke-telling involves both non-bona-fide and bona-fide discourse. For Yamaguchi a joke has both a co-operative and a non-co-operative aspect. He sees a joke as having two 'voices', so to speak: the narrator of the joke, who passes the responsibility for the lack of co-operation on to the fictional character in the joke. What these diverse views have in common is that they have all identified the need to recognise two types of utterance: one that describes a state of affairs in the actual world, and one that describes a state of affairs which is somehow removed from the here and now of real life. Indeed,

Leech's introduction of the terms 'second-order principle' and 'third-order principle' for irony and banter respectively, provide further evidence for the need to distinguish between utterances on different levels of interpretation. Yamaguchi pursues the problem in the most detail, comparing his view with that of Sperber and Wilson in their paper 'Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction' (Sperber and Wilson, 1981).

Wilson and Sperber's thinking has altered somewhat since the publication of that paper. As we have seen, the distinction they now draw between descriptively and interpretively used utterances has become a fully integrated part of their approach to communication. Indeed it is largely because they have incorporated these two utterance types so completely into their overall framework that their approach to communication is so different from any other. For Searle, Raskin and Yamaguchi, there is an underlying assumption that some utterances deviate from the norm, and that jokes are a case in point. For Wilson and Sperber, there are no sub-groups of utterance types to which normal standards of communication do not apply. According to them, both descriptively and interpretively used utterances are commonplace in everyday speech, and as a result they enjoy equal status. This in itself has implications for a theory of humour.

4.2.2. Jokes and interpretive language use

On a relevance-theoretic approach a person telling a joke might be said to be using language interpretively. There are two reasons why this should be the case:

- 1 Joke-telling, as Raskin observed, does not deal with literal truth. We would not accuse a speaker of lying if, in telling a joke, she were to describe a state of affairs that is clearly non-existent.
- 2 Jokes are, typically, transmitted from one person to another. They are rarely made up on the spur of the moment, but are learned and then delivered as and when the occasion demands.

Because so many utterances are likewise a step removed from straightforward descriptive use, there is no strong reason to suppose that any extra mechanism will be required to explain how jokes work. Wilson and Sperber have given us an outline of how poetic and ironical utterances convey the effects they do without recourse to any new terminology. The implication is that jokes, and indeed all humorous utterances, can be similarly treated within the existing theoretical framework. This view is in contrast to that of Searle or Raskin, who see jokes as falling outside a general theory of communication. We will see whether

this no-special-treatment approach of Sperber and Wilson can be applied to the description and explanation of humorous data.

4.2.3. An alternative to the violation approach

Analyses of humour based on the Searle-Grice or Leech models rest on the notion of violation of the maxims. Indeed I have called these theories of humour violation theories. We have seen that these approaches to humour are fundamentally flawed because maxim violation or rule infringement alone cannot distinguish between the humorous and the non-humorous utterance. For Wilson and Sperber the principle of relevance is an exceptionless generalisation about communication. As a result, the question of violation just does not come up. It will thus be interesting to see how relevance theory would account for some of the examples we have looked at in which, it was claimed, some form of violation was involved. Consider yet again the exchange in (1).

(1) Diner: What's this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Looks like the breast stroke, sir.

On a violation approach, the waiter's reply is said to be comic because it goes against pragmatic convention. The waiter has exploited an illocutionary ambiguity (or failed to apply the maxim of relation) and produced an unpredictable, and hence comic, response. On a relevance-theoretic approach, there are no

major conventions governing communication, so no broad generalisations along these lines are possible. To understand what is going on in this example, all we can do is look carefully at what is involved in the processing of both the diner's question and the waiter's reply.

First, in interpreting the diner's utterance, we create a context in which a man eating in a restaurant is complaining angrily to the waiter because there is a fly in his soup. Having set up this context, we now have certain expectations as to what might conceivably happen next. What actually happens challenges these expectations. In processing the waiter's reply, we are forced to create a fresh context, one which involves us in the accessing of some rather different assumptions. They include the following:

- The waiter (mistakenly) thinks that the diner is actually interested in finding out how the fly in his soup is managing to stay afloat.
- The waiter thinks the fly might be doing the breast stroke.

However, there must be more to the joke than this.

Misunderstandings arise all the time. When they do so as a result of some ambiguity, we are caused, on spotting the ambiguity, to accommodate the new information, and make the necessary modifications to the context. Admittedly, the modifications that are required here take us into the realm of

the absurd, but it should be noted that a similar adjustment to the context is necessary also for the interpretation of (2) below. The lack of humour in (2) demonstrates that this mental adjustment in itself is not sufficient to create a humorous effect.

- (2) A man went into a restaurant and ordered a bowl of soup. The soup had a fly in it and the diner complained. "What's this fly doing in my soup?" he demanded angrily. The waiter, who mistakenly thought that the diner really was interested in knowing how the fly in his soup was managing to stay afloat, peered into the soup bowl and replied, "Looks like the breast stroke, sir."

So what is it about (1) that makes it more comic than its long-winded near-equivalent? Many writers on humour have mentioned brevity and suddenness as contributory factors to humour creation (see, for example, Hobbes, 1962; Freud, 1976; Raskin, 1985; Oring, 1989; Giora, 1991). Certainly (1) is more economically expressed than (2), and the effect more sudden. But how exactly do these features of the joke affect our appreciation? Relevance theory can offer up something of an explanation.

It has to do with the two factors affecting the relevance of an utterance in a context: effort and effect. According to Wilson and Sperber we don't engage in mental activity for nothing; we expect some kind of payoff. As hearers we are entitled to expect

adequate effects for no unjustifiable processing effort. We are entitled, in other words, to expect optimal relevance. It is because of this expectation that (3) was considered more appropriate than (4), if it is clear that B does not want to stay awake, that is.

(3) A: Would you like a cup of coffee?

B: Coffee would keep me awake.

(4) A: Would you like a cup of coffee?

B: No thank you. Coffee would keep me awake.

As a general rule, speakers are expected to save their hearers from undue processing effort by leaving implicit any material that can be taken for granted and is accessible enough to need no prompting. This is what B has failed to do in (4). In processing her reply, A - if he is a normal hearer - is required to put in more effort than would be necessary to process B's reply in (3), but with no additional reward in the form of an extra contextual effect.

(3) and (4) are fairly straightforward examples. In cases where humour is intended, things become a little more complicated. It seems that in humorous utterances speakers often leave implicit material that ~~cannot~~ necessarily be taken for granted. The waiter's reply in (1) is a good example of an utterance whose

interpretation involves us in a lot of processing work because the assumptions we have to supply are not easily accessible.

But still this doesn't explain the humour in (1). Although hearers expect to benefit from any extra processing that they have to do, there is no hard and fast guarantee that they will do so. In fact, it seems that the relationship between effort and effect in humorous utterances is less direct than I have so far indicated. I want to suggest that the humour in the waiter's reply stems, not so much from the (albeit absurd) assumptions that we have to supply, but from the fact that we have to supply them at all. In other words, in supplying these relatively inaccessible assumptions, we are caused to entertain the idea that the waiter thinks that they are readily accessible, a state of affairs which gives rise to some further absurd assumptions:

- There is nothing unusual, or wrong, in serving soup that is contaminated with verminous insects.
- The first question that would occur to someone finding a fly in his soup is what swimming stroke it is doing.

What I am saying, then, is that there are two layers of processing here: the first layer enables us to interpret, in a superficial way, the waiter's response; while the second layer enables us to appreciate fully its absurdity. The point - that is to say, the real relevance - of the waiter's utterance comes in at the second stage. In other words, the humour has less to

do with the state of affairs being depicted, and much more to do with the sudden insight we get into the waiter's mental world. The joke is funny because it is plainly ludicrous that the interpretation selected by him should be the one the diner intended.

I think we might now be in a position to understand more fully the difference between (1) and (2). We have seen that in interpreting (1) we have a huge amount of work to do, reorganising our existing assumptions, while in (2) most of the work is done for us. If the speaker merely wanted to report a misunderstanding, the extra processing required in (1) would hardly be justified. However - and this ^{is} the real difference between (1) and (2) - the point of the joke is not to describe the misunderstanding as such. Rather the person telling us the joke is commenting on the waiter's stupidity - or, on another interpretation - his guile. In short, (2) tells us how the waiter went wrong, while (1) carries with it the additional information, expressed through implicature:

- Isn't it funny that the waiter should go wrong in this way?

In other words, the joke is a case of showing rather than telling. You have to see that it's funny, rather than merely being told. The sudden rush of laughter comes at that moment of recognition, and it is at this point that the increased processing effort pays off.

4.2.4. Locutionary and illocutionary ambiguity

We will look at another example.

(5) Waiter: How did you find your steak, sir?

Diner: Quite by accident. I moved a few peas and there it
was.

On a speech act analysis, both (1) and (5) were said to involve the exploitation of an ambiguity, but whereas (1) was analysed on Hancher's approach, as being ambiguous on the illocutionary level, (5) was analysed as being ambiguous on the locutionary level. Because of the surface similarity of these two examples, it was felt that an analysis which emphasised the difference between them went against our intuitions. Thus on the revised version of the speech act approach, (1) and (5) were treated the same: both examples were said to involve failure on the part of the hearer to apply the maxim of relation.

On a relevance-theoretic account, our intuitions are likewise taken care of. In interpreting the diner's reply we have to reorganise the context, just as we did in (1), abandoning existing assumptions and supplying fresh ones. One assumption we abandon is the following:

- The waiter is asking whether the steak is all right.

We then replace it with these three:

- The waiter actually wants to know how he (the diner) managed to find his steak;
- The steak was so minute it could be hidden underneath a few peas;
- Steaks so small can be obtained.

If this were the end of the matter, the diner's reply would fall short of achieving optimal relevance, for the extra processing effort would have failed to yield any returns. However, once again, the fact that we are being asked to supply material which cannot easily be taken for granted leads to further implications. Indeed it is at this second stage of the interpretation process that we realise we are being asked to entertain the idea:

- It is normal to serve such a tiny piece of meat in a restaurant and call it a steak.

Thus we become aware of the diner's informative intention:

- Isn't it funny that the diner should pick that interpretation, with all that this implies, in preference to the one which was so clearly intended?

4.2.5. Indeterminacy of expression in humour

In addition to the inadequacy of the notion of violation as either a descriptive or an explanatory tool, there was a further problem when these examples were discussed within the framework of speech act theory. It concerned their indeterminacy. In both (1) and (5) it is an open question as to whether the misunderstanding is a mistake or a clever evasion. With a slight modification to Searle's inventory of utterance types, it was possible to accommodate this duality. However, the problem of indeterminacy within a particular interpretation remained. If the misunderstanding is taken to be deliberate, for example, there is the further question as to what point, if any, is being made. Take (5). If it is decided that the diner is pretending to misinterpret the waiter, we then have to decide whether he is playing an impish game or whether his remark has some purpose. If it has a purpose, the most likely interpretation would be one where the diner is commenting on the stinginess of the management for serving such small portions. And, in a more general sense, the utterance could be seen as a comment on all restaurants that try to maximize their profits by serving minute portions of the more expensive items on the menu.

Unravelling a joke like this can lead us into areas which are a little less than straightforward. Two question marks seem to hang over this joke:

- Can we appreciate the joke without recovering these weaker impressions I have just outlined?
- Does my interpretation differ, in some of its details, from the one the inventor of the joke intended?

My answer to the first question is yes, and to the second that it is immaterial; and the point about both questions is that this kind of individual variation in interpretation is inevitable. Psychologists have shown that there are many factors affecting individual differences in humour appreciation (see, for example, Wolff et al., 1934; La Fave et al., 1976; Bourhis et al., 1977; Sheppard, 1977; Ruch et al., 1991). One of these concerns our degree of familiarity with the topic described in the joke (Cetola, 1988). If, for example, we have had direct experience of restaurants where the portions served are small, our appreciation of (5) is likely to be enhanced. What is important here is that relevance theory predicts that this kind of variation will occur, while speech act theorists - to the extent that they concentrate on determinate aspects of meaning - rule it out.

4.2.6. The notion of optimal relevance

Another major difference between Wilson and Sperber's approach and that of Grice is that the former introduce a notion of optimal relevance. Remember that every utterance creates in the

hearer an expectation of optimal relevance, and that an interpretation is said to be optimally relevant if the hearer obtains adequate effects for no unjustifiable processing effort. This attempt by Wilson and Sperber to define relevance in terms of hearers' expectations goes well beyond anything Griceans have in mind when they talk about relevance. When it comes to understanding humorous utterances, the notion of relevance as a comparative concept is a useful one.

Remember that for Wilson and Sperber all phenomena, and in particular, all stimuli, verbal or otherwise, are processed in a context, where the context is seen as being drawn from the set of assumptions that are manifest (that is to say, everything that can be assumed or inferred) to the individual concerned at the moment the stimulus is received. In processing the responses to (1) and (5), a massive reorganisation takes place as we abandon our existing assumptions and supply fresh ones. Not all jokes depend on our making such radical alterations, however.

Sometimes it is more a case of reordering rather than replacement that is in order. Wilson and Sperber emphasise the point that in any given context some assumptions are more manifest than others. They give as an example the case of a doorbell ringing (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 40). They say that a strongly manifest assumption here would be that there is someone at the door. Less strongly manifest would be the assumption that the person at the door is tall enough to reach the bell, and less strongly manifest still would be the assumption that the doorbell has not been

stolen. Most strongly manifest of all, of course, is the fact, for which there is conclusive evidence, that the doorbell is ringing.

Generally speaking, when we respond to a stimulus, we construct that representation of the stimulus that strikes us as most relevant. If we then feel that the resulting representation might be relevant enough to be worth our addressee's attention, we might produce an utterance intended to communicate it to him. To be appropriate, this utterance must be consistent with the principle of relevance, that is, it must yield adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort, or at least have been rationally expected to do so.

Imagine this scenario. I am at home with a friend. The doorbell rings. My friend utters:

(6) I wonder who that is.

In uttering (6), the speaker is focussing on a strongly manifest assumption, namely that there is someone at the door. Thus there is nothing untoward about her utterance. Suppose, however, that instead of uttering (6), my friend were to utter (7).

(7) Well, I see the doorbell hasn't been stolen.

The speaker in (7) is focussing on an assumption that, in the circumstances, is only weakly manifest; and yet, in processing the utterance, we automatically entertain the notion that the assumption that the doorbell has not been stolen is relevant enough to be worth our attention and hence, that it could not be taken for granted. As with the jokes we have just looked at, there seem to be two stages to the interpretation process. First we process the information conveyed, then we are struck by how odd it is that someone should want to convey that information. This may affect us in either of two ways:

- 1 We may feel disconcerted that our addressee's mind should operate in this way; or
- 2 We may feel amused that it should do so.

Indeed it may be that humour was intended (add to the context the information that the house in question had recently been burgled); in which case we would hope that the hearer recognises this and is suitably amused.

4.2.7. Optimal Relevance and the humour in riddles

This foregrounding of weakly manifest (and hence inadequately relevant) assumptions is used widely in humour. We will see that many riddles work in just this way. Consider (8).

(8) A: What's the difference between an elephant and a biscuit?

B: You can't dip an elephant in your tea.

It is an indisputable fact that an elephant cannot be dipped in a cup of tea, but this is not the kind of assumption that springs to mind when pondering the difference between elephants and biscuits. What do spring to mind are highly relevant assumptions such as (9) and (10).

(9) Elephants are large, biscuits are small.

(10) Biscuits are edible, elephants are not.

This automatic selecting of relevant material is something of an obstruction when trying to solve riddles. Our finely tuned processing skills work against us in our search for the 'right' answer. Unless we have heard the joke before, it is unlikely that we could come up with the response in (8).

But why is (8) comic? It seems to me that it is very similar in its working to (7) - if the speaker of (7) intended to amuse, that is. First, we are caused to entertain the thought that the information contained in the response might be optimally relevant to some people. We are then in a position to appreciate the absurdity of the thought that such information could possibly be optimally relevant, i.e. that it could contain, not only new information, but information that might be valuable to the hearer.

Note that in addition, (8) is constructed to ensure that it achieves maximum effect. Because we are asked specifically to think about the difference between elephants and biscuits, we are encouraged to bring to mind assumptions such as (9) and (10). This can only serve to divert us from the kind of response our addressee is looking for. When we are finally given the answer, the contrast between our world and this joke world is thrown into sharp relief. Moreover, the joke is phrased in such a way that we are led to think that there is one - and only one - highly significant difference between elephants and biscuits. (Notice that we are asked for the, not a, difference.) This can only serve to heighten the absurdity of the answer. In this sense, (8) could be seen as a more extreme version of (7). In (7) a weakly manifest assumption is given prominence; while in (8) a weakly manifest assumption is singled out as being the only assumption worth considering at all.

There is another aspect to the phrasing of (8) that deserves mention. Compare (8) with (11).

(11) A: What's the difference between an elephant and a
biscuit?

B: You can dip a biscuit in your tea.

I think it is uncontroversial to say that the response in (8) is more comic than the response in (11). We will try to understand why. B's reply in (8) states explicitly that:

- You cannot dip an elephant in your tea

and implies that:

- You can dip a biscuit in your tea.

B's reply in (11) differs in that what is explicit in (8) is rendered implicit, while the implicit material in that example is rendered explicit. In terms of what is strongly communicated, then, the information conveyed in the two utterances is identical. The difference seems to lie in the weaker effects that each utterance conveys. To assert that something can't be done suggests that some people think otherwise; that is, (8) gives rise to the absurd thought that someone lacking the vital information it contains might, on coming across an elephant, actually attempt to dip it in his tea. This idea is given much less prominence in (11), and is therefore unlikely to be recovered.

All riddles which foreground a weakly manifest assumption work by creating these absurd impressions, with the style of the response being very closely linked to the effect obtained. Another example is given below.

- (12) A: What's the difference between a lemon and an elephant?
B: A lemon is yellow.

Again, the answer to this riddle, though true, is not relevant enough to fulfill our expectations. Because we automatically think of circumstances in which it would be relevant enough, the joke is funny. However, as with (8) above, the style of the response is inextricably linked to the creation of the humorous effect. Compare (12) with (13).

- (13) A: What's the difference between a lemon and an elephant?
B: An elephant is grey.

(13) is less funny than (12), isn't it? I think the difference here lies in the fact that the word lemon is commonly used as a colour term. We can say, for instance:

- (14) The Princess of Wales looked radiant in a lemon suit with
matching accessories.

As a result, the word lemon is linked more firmly in our minds with yellowness than the word elephant is with greyness. This is illustrated by (15), which would seem to suggest, not that the Prince of Wales is wearing grey, but that he is in fancy dress.

- (15) The Prince of Wales looked equally dashing in a well-cut,
elephant suit.

It follows from this that the utterance:

- A lemon is yellow

as a response to A's utterance in (12), foregrounds an assumption that is less relevant than the assumption that is foregrounded in the utterance

- An elephant is grey.

In other words, the assumption a lemon is yellow is so obvious to everyone that it is not worth remarking on. The greyness of elephants is not particularly worth remarking on either, but has slightly more news value, (i.e. relevance), than the yellowness of lemons. Because of this, the person who needs - that is, would find relevant - the information that lemons are yellow is just slightly more green than the person who needs to be told that elephants are grey.

Although Hancher does not discuss this type of example, it could be argued that both (8) and (12) involve a violation of the maxim of relation. The problem is that Grice fails, on his own admission, to give a precise enough definition of relevance, and, in cases such as these, where some notion of optimal relevance, or at least degrees of relevance, is required, straightforward violation of the relation maxim is inadequate to describe what is going on. It would mean, for example, that we should be unable to distinguish between (8) and (12), which are comic, and (16), below, which is not.

(16) A: What's the difference between an elephant and a
biscuit?

B: We all like biscuits.

Second, the differing effects obtained by stylistic variants,
which are neatly captured by relevance theory, with its twin
notions of effect and effort, fall outside the scope of the
Searle-Grice model.

* * * * *

Giora's (1991) analysis - in which it is claimed that a joke is
well-formed if it (a) obeys the Relevance Requirement and (b)
violates the Graded Informativeness Requirement (Giora, 1991) -
is, in some respects, an improvement on the Searle-Grice model.
It would successfully eliminate the non-comic exchange in (16),
for instance, on the grounds that the Relevance Requirement is
not met. However, in common with the Searle-Grice model, Giora's
analysis cannot handle stylistic variants: it would be likewise
unable to distinguish between the comic exchange in (8) above and
its non-comic near-equivalent in (11).

4.2.8. The relevance-theoretic approach and the speech act approach: a brief summary

At this point it may be worth summarising my position so that some important differences between the relevance-theoretic approach and the speech act analysis may be clearly understood. Remember that for Hancher humorous utterances thwart our expectations, with violation of Grice's maxims and Searle's conditions being used as a means to this end. On the basis of the examples we have looked at so far in this chapter it might seem that a relevance-theoretic analysis is not significantly different from this, by now fairly well established, view. After all, both the waiter-diner jokes and the elephant jokes considered above were analysed as necessitating a restructuring of the context, brought about by the fact that they contained utterances which went against our expectations.

I think that one significant difference is that relevance theory pushes the analysis a stage further. What I have tried to show is that the humour lies not in the context modification as such, but in the assumptions underlying the fact that we have to modify the context in the first place. Being taken by surprise is not in itself funny, but sometimes, in processing these surprising utterances for optimal relevance, we are transported into a world that is absurdly comic. In other words, it is not the thwarted expectations but the subsequent cognitive reorganisation that seems to be more closely linked to the humorous effect (note 2).

Another feature of the relevance-theoretic approach which has emerged in the course of the above discussion, concerns the idea that humour depends, to some extent, not (or not only) on the type of content, but on the way the content is communicated. Comparisons between (1) and (2), (8) and (11), and (12) and (13) were used to illustrate how the wording of a joke can be crucial to the effect obtained.

4.2.9. Beyond the level of the exchange

We have noted the usefulness of the notions of optimal relevance and degrees of relevance: another characteristic of the relevance-theoretic model is that it has implications above the level of the exchange. Wilson and Sperber argue that we all have quite strong intuitions about how much detail is required of a communicator in a given context, and, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, what is optimally relevant in one context is not necessarily optimally relevant in another. I used as an example an enquiry about one's health, saying that an acquaintance at the bus-stop would expect a very different response from that of a doctor holding a surgery. Now occasionally speakers misread a situation and overburden their addressees with boring and unnecessary detail. I was recently subjected to a detailed account of the inner workings of a colleague's car, offered in response to a polite enquiry as to whether the said car had been repaired. The situation struck me

as mildly humorous, which is hardly surprising when you think about it. What made the situation amusing was the idea that the speaker should think that I was actually interested in what he was saying (that I should find it optimally relevant).

Of course the motor car bore did not intend to amuse - and yet a parallel can be drawn between this and the examples discussed above where humour is intended. Again there seem to be two stages to the interpretation process. First I had to process all the information about the car - what went wrong with it, what spare parts were needed, how they were obtained, and so on. Had I been interested in cars I might have been sufficiently rewarded for my efforts, and the interpretation process would be completed. However, my lack of interest in the topic being discussed caused me to feel intense boredom, as all my expectations of relevance went unfulfilled, and it was at this point that I was able to distance myself from the content and appreciate how absurd it was that such material was being conveyed to me at all. Once the fact of being told something takes on a greater significance than the information itself, some sort of cognitive reorganisation takes place. And in this instance, as in the waiter-diner jokes above, reorganisation gave rise to a humorous effect.

People often get carried away by their enthusiasm for a particular subject, as many comedy writers are keenly aware. Indeed it may be as a result of exposure to this type of comic

situation that I found the above incident amusing and not frustrating. In the extract below we have a variation on this idea, someone who ~~is~~ prepared to put in an enormous amount of effort for (what to us would be) scant reward. Tony Hancock is contacting by wireless a fellow radio ham.

(17) Tony: This is GLK London calling HB 24 D Tokyo. GLK
London calling HB 24 Tokyo. Come in, Tokyo. (He
adjusts some dials, then listens intently.) Hallo,
hallo, HB 24 D Tokyo. Yoki? How are you? No, no,
no, how ... are ... you? (Tries Japanese accent.)
How are you? This London GLK, how getting are you?
Oh, never mind, how's the weather out there? No,
no, what is the weather like? No, no, is it
raining? Raining. Pitter patter. Water. Wet.
Ugh, nasty. Hallo, hallo. Yes, listening, go
ahead. Sorry, what was that? Yes, I can hear,
no understand. I ... cannot ... understand. Can
you put it another way? Put it another way? Say
it differently. No, in English. Fool! Slowly,
now. Slowly. It ... is ... are ... raining not.
Oh, good, good. Very good. It is are raining not
here also. Yes. Cor, this is hard work.
(Galton and Simpson, 1986: 128)

Surprisingly, Hancock does not feel short changed after this Herculean effort to discover whether it is raining in Japan. He

has worn himself out, but feels well rewarded for his efforts, to the extent that he goes on to remark, with some smugness:

(18) Tony: Ah, it's marvellous to be able to converse with people all over the world. People different to yourself, with something new to say, it broadens your outlook, increases your knowledge of things. I bet there's not many people round here who know it's not raining in Tokyo. I suppose I must lead what the Social Workers call a full life. (Galton and Simpson, *ibid*: 128)

Of course this only compounds the humour for the audience, who proceed beyond the initial stage of the interpretation process to recover the author's informative intention - the real relevance, that is, of Hancock's speech:

- Isn't it funny that Hancock should consider it worth all that effort, just to exchange the kind of banalities that are exchanged when we literally have nothing of any interest to say?

It would be difficult to account for examples such as (17) on a violation approach. With the exception of ironical utterances, violation analyses are typically restricted to one or two line utterances. Indeed, it will be remembered that in so far as the maxim of relation was concerned, Hancher believed that sustained violation destroyed any humorous effect that might be obtained.

4.2.10. Echoic utterances and humour

I said at the beginning of this section that joke-telling generally involves interpretive language use. This is because in telling a joke we are offering up - in most cases - a report of a thought or utterance that is attributed to someone else; a paradigm example, that is, of an interpretively used utterance. Jokes were also said to represent a variety of interpretive use in the sense that they deal, not with real-life situations, but with hypothetical ones. The difference is essentially between saying, 'The world is like this' and, 'Wouldn't it be funny if the world were like this?'. All the jokes so far discussed fit into this category.

In addition to these quite straightforward aspects of interpretive use, there is what is arguably a more interesting dimension. It concerns the use of echoic utterances. Remember the motor car bore above. Now compare that incident with the following extract from a play by Ayckbourn.

(19) Sidney: I've got some more shelves upstairs. For the
 bedside. And also I've partitioned off part of
 the spare bedroom as a walk-in cupboard for the
 wife. And I'm just about to panel the landing
 with those knotty pine units, have you seen them?
 (Ayckbourn, 1977: 27)

Here Ayckbourn is using language echoically to mimic, not the motoring bore, but the archetypal DIY bore, the enthusiast who is oblivious to the fact that not everyone shares his interest in fitted kitchens and stripped pine. Ayckbourn has used both irony and parody to ridicule poor Sidney. We find parody, the echoing of linguistic form, in his use of non-standard forms - for example, the wife instead of my wife. Ayckbourn is mimicking the socially insecure. Lower middle class Sidney is intent on impressing his middle class boss, but he unwittingly exposes himself by using these stigmatised forms. Irony, the echoing of content, lies in Ayckbourn's ridiculing of Sidney's preoccupations with home improvements, the struggle for a 'nice house' - particularly of the fitted kitchen and stripped pine variety - being, stereotypically, a lower middle class one. Middle and upper class people have different tastes, and are more likely, presumably, to take their pleasant surroundings for granted.

In trying to be funny we are necessarily expressing our attitude. At the very least, we are saying something like the following:

- I think this sort of thing is funny and I want you to find it funny as well.

Because echoic utterances are an important vehicle for the expression of attitude, we should not be surprised to find that

they feature prominently in all brands of humour. We will look at another example of irony, from an earlier chapter.

(20) Linus: My heartiest congratulations! You did it! You have been crabby for one thousand days in a row! You have just set an all-time record! I knew you could do it! ... Let me shake your hand again. I'd also like to present you with this specially inscribed scroll commemorating this historical event. Again may I say 'Congratulations!' You are an inspiration to all the crabby people in the world!

According to Hancher, irony occurs when the speaker overtly violates the sincerity condition. On recognising that this condition is being violated, hearers are able to recover the intended ironical meaning, which, it is claimed, is the opposite of what the sentence means literally. This account was found to be unsatisfactory on a descriptive level when it was demonstrated that the meaning of (20) was not simply the contradictory of its literal interpretation.

Wilson and Sperber see the effect communicated by an ironical utterance, not as the polar opposite of, but as a distancing, or dissociation, from the literal interpretation. So, in relevance-theoretic terms, Linus is dissociating himself from the propositions expressed, and thereby indicating something of his

attitude to Lucy's crabbiness. He is ridiculing the very idea that she should be praised for being so bad-tempered, and at the same time he is making it clear that he does not really approve of her behaviour. Again, it seems that we are dealing not just with irony but with parody as well. His remarks are ironical in so far as the kind of things that are said are those that are typically uttered at prize-giving ceremonies. Parody lies in the rather ebullient phraseology adopted by Linus, echoing the way congratulations are meted out on these official occasions. His remarks are comic because it is ludicrous that crabbiness should be seen as a quality worthy of praise. (Consistent with this view - and equally ridiculous - would be the assumption that good-naturedness is to be derided.) This, then, is a rather heavy-handed example of irony/parody. The thoughts expressed are so patently ridiculous that we have no trouble recovering the echoic element, and hence Linus's attitude of disapproval and mockery.

4.2.11. Puns and the echoing of form

The Wilson-Sperber notion of irony as a type of echoic utterance has proved useful. Examples such as (20), which could not be adequately accounted for on a speech act analysis, fit neatly into the relevance-theoretic framework. More subtle cases of irony, such as (19), are also easily accounted for. It is important to remember, though, that to be funny echoic utterances

do not have to be either ironic or parodic. To illustrate this, we will look at some examples where form is echoed, but without the use of parody. Consider the following.

(21) Divers do it more deeply.

(22) Non-smokers do it without puffing.

(21) and (22) are based on a rather tired formula, X do it adv P, of which the original is generally understood to have been (23)

(23) Windsurfers do it standing up.

In processing (21) and (22), we recognise the formula and recover the ambiguity, that is to say, both the sexual and the non-sexual interpretations. To take delight in word-play is a universal human characteristic, maybe because the extra processing effort required is well-rewarded (two ideas for the price of one). Puns are not always comic, however, so the effort-effect explanation is, at best, only half the story (note 3).

Perhaps it will help us to understand these examples better if we consider carefully the thoughts we are caused to entertain in recovering the ambiguity. The first point about these examples is that they each contain both a 'safe' and a 'risque' interpretation. The reason, of course, that the sexual interpretation is risque is that sex is a taboo topic of conversation. It is thus something of an anomaly to use your

rear windscreen to announce to the world the manner in which you - the assumption is that the owner of the car is a member of the group referred to - have sexual intercourse. In fact it is more than just an anomaly: because a taboo is being broken, it is mildly controversial. Notice, however, that these stickers are not overtly controversial: there is always the guise of the safe interpretation. And it seems to me that to appreciate the joke we have to recover not only these two interpretations but the conflicting assumptions underlying them. On the one hand, we have the subversive playing at being the innocent; on the other, the innocent is being inadvertently subversive. (Again there is a similarity here between this example and the waiter-diner jokes cited above.) The former interpretation causes us to entertain the absurd idea that the sexual interpretation is not controversial, while the latter causes us to entertain the equally absurd notion that someone could be so innocent as to be oblivious to the double entendre. Both interpretations then, depend on the other for their effect. It is essentially from this interdependency that the humour stems (note 4).

This idea of controversiality - or, more correctly, 'controversiality' - explains, I think, why allusions to sex often occur in humour. In French the verb faire can be exploited in the same way that English speakers exploit the verb do (see Redfern, 1984); while Aristophanes never missed an opportunity to create a pun out of the ambiguity of the Greek word keles, meaning either a rowing boat or to have sex. He used it whenever

he referred to the Salaminians, who had to row across the strait to get to Athens. (See, for example, Aristophanes, 1983: 182 and note: 249.) It should be emphasised, though, that there is nothing intrinsically comic about the breaking of a taboo. What we laugh at is the idea that a speaker could, in all innocence, allude to a topic such as sex and believe all along (or have us believe) that she is acting with the utmost propriety (note 5).

4.2.12. Relevance theory and the 'second-degree joke'

Some humour theorists have argued that there is a type of joke which depends for its success on the hearer recognising the source text (Attardo, 1988; Norrick, 1989; Zajdman, 1991). Attardo calls these jokes 'second-degree jokes' (SDJ), an example of which might be:

- (24) A: Why did the elephant cross the road?
B: I don't know. Why did the elephant cross the road?
A: It was the chicken's day off.

To appreciate the (rather weak) humour in this joke, the hearer would have to know that there is an original ("Why did the chicken cross the road...?") on which it is based. A second-degree joke, then, is a 'joke played on a joke' (Zajdman, *ibid*: 38).

It should be noted that relevance theory has the framework already in place to account for these instances of so-called 'second-degree humour': they would simply be classified as instances of echoic use. Moreover, it could be argued that it is unhelpful to put these jokes in to a separate category, for the following reasons:

- 1) In some cases, recognition of the formula plays only a minor part in the creation of the humour - e.g. the do it car sticker jokes cited above, light bulb jokes, knock-knock jokes; while at other times it is crucial - e.g. the elephant joke in (24).
- 2) Recognition of a source text is necessary for the interpretation of many, non-humorous utterances - e.g. ironical quotations (Wilson and Sperber, 1988) and advertising slogans (McCarthy, 1992).

In other words, Attardo's classification forces dissimilar utterances in to a single category, while at the same time significant similarities between 'second-degree jokes' and other echoic utterances escape description.

4.2.13. Can we distinguish, in pragmatic terms, between the humorous and the non-humorous utterance?

I have talked about the two layers of processing that seem to occur in jokes, citing as examples of this the waiter-diner jokes and elephant jokes. I have also mentioned how the fact that a

speaker expresses a particular thought is sometimes more important to the creation of the humorous effect than the information actually conveyed. These two processes are, of course, linked, for on occasions when radical reorganisation takes place, it is to be expected that the hearer will be struck - to a greater or lesser extent - by the fact that such reorganisation was necessary.

This does not mean that the 'double-take', which seems to be such an important part of the humorous utterance, will provide the key to all humour. The truth is that very many utterances seem to work on these two levels of interpretation - some are humorous, some are not. Take the case cited above of the doorbell ringing. I said that if a speaker were to utter:

(7) Well, I see the doorbell hasn't been stolen

the hearer may either be amused or disconcerted. (She may also be neither of these things.) I have already constructed a context in which an utterance of (7) might be construed as comic: it may be disconcerting in a context in which the speaker were known to have a mental illness. The point is that in both instances the hearer has gone beyond the initial stage of the interpretation process; that is, she has focussed not on the information conveyed but on the fact of its being conveyed.

What this means is that some of the cognitive processes which have been shown to result in a humorous effect may equally occur in the processing of non-humorous utterances. This is not to say that relevance theory is incapable of distinguishing between the humorous and the non-humorous remark. (It will be remembered that the Searle-Grice model was criticised on just these grounds.) It does suggest, though, that the difference may be rather a subtle one. Let's look more closely at the utterance in (7). I said above that if the hearer's house had recently been burgled, a speaker may utter (7) with the intention of creating a humorous effect. In order to appreciate the humour, the hearer would have to recover some of the weak implicatures conveyed by (7) (when humour is intended). These would include the following:

- This burglar took everything it was possible to take
- It is usual for burglars to steal doorbells
- Doorbells are of some value.
- Doorbells are easily dismantled and stolen.

In a context in which the hearer is disconcerted or disturbed by the utterance in (7), it is unlikely that these weak implicatures would be recovered. Instead the hearer is more likely to infer something like the following:

- The speaker is off her trolley

and leave it at that.

The difference is essentially this: when humour is intended, the utterance conveys a range of weak implicatures, which are part of the intended interpretation of the utterance; when humour is not intended (and the hearer is not amused), these weak implicatures are absent.' (A similar point has been made by Jodlowiec (1991)). So the answer to the question at the head of this sub-section is yes, it does seem to be possible to distinguish between the effects obtained when an utterance is humorously intended and the different effects obtained when that same utterance is non-humorously intended.

In the final section of this chapter we will consider some further examples before we address the broader issue as to whether there is a general pragmatic principle underpinning all humorous utterances. In other words, we will try to find out whether humour is, from a pragmatic point of view, unique.

4.3.1. A relevance-theoretic approach to humour (2)

In order to highlight the differences between the speech act and relevance-theoretic models, I began the previous section with a discussion of examples cited by the former. From there I went on to look at examples which had not been previously discussed in the literature. This was necessary because I wanted to show how some particular features of the relevance-theoretic model - for example, the notion of optimal relevance - could usefully be applied to humour. There remain to be discussed two types of example:

- 1) those jokes that were introduced in chapter three, where violation, if it occurs, has to do with social, rather than specifically pragmatic, constraints;
- 2) unintentional humour.

We will consider below how relevance theory might respond to these aspects of humour.

4.3.2. An alternative to violation of the politeness maxims

Consider again the following excerpts from a conversation between a shop assistant and a customer in a trendy boutique.

(1) Customer: I wondered if you have these in a fourteen?

Assistant: You what? This is a boutique, not the Elephant House.

And then later:

(2) Customer: I don't really suit green.

Assistant: I shouldn't think you suit much do you, body like that ...

On Hancher's analysis there was a problem with these examples because although it was felt that something was being violated, none of the existing maxims was capable of capturing the exact nature of the violation. With Leech's extension of the maxims we were able to analyse both (1) and (2) as violations of the approbation maxim. Later on we saw that the problem with this, and indeed all violation approaches, concerned the fact that there was no satisfactory way of distinguishing between utterances such as (1) and (2) when humour is intended, and those instances when the same utterances are intended as spiteful and insulting. What would relevance theory have to say about them?

On a relevance-theoretic analysis these examples are similar, in some respects, to the waiter-diner jokes already discussed. In both we are required, in the pursuit of relevance, to restructure our cognitive environment, and in so doing, we are caused to entertain the absurd. In the case of (1) and (2) above, we are

transported from the predictable world in which shop assistants flatter their customers in order to secure a sale, to one where they mercilessly insult them. (The TV sit com 'Fawlty Towers', which had a hotel proprietor treating his guests as interfering intruders unworthy of his services, was based on a similar idea.) Moreover, the assistant's responses convey the following, weakly implicated (and absurd) assumptions:

Women who wear size fourteen clothes (the most common dress size for British women)

- are obese
- should not be looking for clothes in a trendy boutique, but in a shop that specialises in outsize clothing
- should give up trying to look attractive;

It is immaterial whether

- any merchandise is sold
- the business makes any profit.

However, as with the waiter-diner jokes, the reconstruction that is required to interpret the assistant's responses in (1) and (2) is, on its own, insufficient to explain their humour. After all, if we were to imagine circumstances where the assistant is being genuinely abusive, a similar reorganisation of the context would also be necessary. The defining feature of (1) and (2) as humorous exchanges, it seems, is their echoic nature. Wood is ridiculing a certain type of shop assistant in these examples; we

are expected to recognise this and recover her intention to amuse.

There are other examples from chapter three which depend, on a relevance-theoretic analysis, on our recognising the echoic nature of an utterance. Take the sketch involving the bereaved wife of a popular novelist and an unscrupulous journalist. It started like this:

(3) Reporter: Widow Smith? I'm from the 'Herald and Argus'. I believe your husband's just died and he was quite well known or something.

.....

Widow: Come in then, I haven't done much tidying up since
.....

(They go in)

Reporter: Good excuse, a death, isn't it, to bunk off the housework?

On Leech's analysis this example was said to represent a violation of the sympathy maxim, but we saw, in a subsequent section of that chapter, that a flagrant violation of a politeness maxim is not sufficient to create a humorous effect. The utterance in (4), for instance, is not funny.

(4) Congratulations! I hear your husband's just died.

On a relevance-theoretic approach the difference between (3) and (4) is straightforward. In (3) Wood is echoing the kind of remarks that journalists make in order to get a story. Of course, Wood's version is an exaggeration of what would happen in real life, but nonetheless we recognise the sort of character that is being ridiculed and recover Wood's humorous intention. In (4) the echoic element is absent, and as a result it isn't comic.

It seems that all the examples which were described as being violations of the politeness maxims can be treated on a relevance-theoretic approach as examples of caricature. Remember the cartoon depicting the two men at the diner counter, with the salt, pepper and catsup at the far end, a great distance away. When one man says to the other:

(5) Would you please pass the catsup?

we said that the tact maxim ("minimize cost to other: maximize benefit to other") was being violated. Hancher, who introduced a new regulative rule on the basis of this example, saw the cause of the humour in a similar light when he said that we do not ask anything of an equal if we could just as easily do it ourselves. This clearly seems to be what is going on in this example. Regardless of their position in the outside world, two strangers in a restaurant (particularly in a fast food restaurant) have more or less equal status - in respect of each other, that is.

The speaker of (5) is thus upsetting the relationship that would normally pertain in this context. The relevance-theoretic analysis differs in so far as it goes beyond the recognition that a social norm is being violated to look at the assumptions underlying this break with convention. The diner's utterance suggests that, as far as he is concerned, there is nothing uncontentious about his request, so we have a lot of work to do, restructuring our cognitive environment in order to understand his conception of the world.

But, once again, that is only half the story. The author of (5) is not merely reporting an incident which actually occurred, for if he were, the utterance would not be (intentionally) comic. Central to the humour in this example is the attitude being expressed. To appreciate the humour, we have to recover the underlying message, the real relevance, that is, of (5):

- Isn't it absurd when people make outrageous demands, while acting for all the world as though there is nothing inappropriate about their behaviour?

The utterance in (5), then, is poking fun at a certain type of person, and unless we recognise this echoic element, the joke will not work.

4.3.3. The relevance-theoretic approach and the modification of
the speech act approach: a brief summary

We have looked at several examples which were analysed in chapter three as involving violation of the PP. (It is worth remembering that the PP was initially brought in to the discussion because there seemed to be cases which fell outside the Searle-Grice analysis, but which were thought, nonetheless, to involve some form of violation.) On a relevance-theoretic analysis it has been demonstrated that there is little real difference between what, on a speech-act approach, would be seen as two different types of joke. Take, for example, the waiter-diner jokes of chapter two (CP violation) and the shop assistant-customer jokes of chapter three (PP violation). According to relevance theory, both types of joke cause the hearer to discard some existing (and easily accessible) assumptions and replace them with some fresh (but rather unusual) ones. In addition, both joke types require that the hearer recognise the echoic nature of the language used.

It is this second feature which is linked to the two layers of processing which is required for the successful interpretation of these utterances as jokes. Remember that in the previous section of this chapter I argued that we could only appreciate the humour in the waiter-diner jokes when we distanced ourselves from the content and focused on the fact of its being conveyed in the first place. It is important to realise that this is equally

true of the shop assistant-customer jokes and the catsup example cited above.

This is not to say that these two types of joke should be treated as identical. What does seem to have emerged, though, is that the difference between them is one of emphasis rather than substance. In the waiter-diner jokes the contextual reorganisation that is required to interpret the response is arguably greater than in the shop assistant-customer jokes. The reason for this has to do with the fact that the former contain a misunderstanding which necessitates a reprocessing of the first speaker's question: in the shop assistant-customer jokes, this major upheaval of the context at this level of interpretation does not occur.

It is important to realise that I am not claiming that the waiter-diner jokes involve the hearer in more processing effort, only that they involve the hearer in more effort at the first level of interpretation. When it comes to the second level, it may be the case that it is the shop assistant-customer jokes which require more effort on the part of the hearer. The thinking behind this would be the idea that the shop assistant-customer jokes are examples of caricature, which means that to appreciate the humour, we have to recognise the type of high-handed shop assistant who is being ridiculed and be able to recover all the absurdist assumptions that go hand in hand with this. These weak implicatures can only be recovered when the

first layer of processing is complete. So, what I am claiming is that jokes can vary, in a significant way, according to where the bulk of the processing effort lies.

The idea that jokes can be distinguished from one another according to the nature of the effort required to process them represents a radical departure from the revised speech-act approach, which classifies jokes according to the rules - social or linguistic - which are being violated. This difference is highlighted when considering jokes which were said to violate the PP because of the emphasis, in those examples, on constraints on content (for example, the avoidance of the expression of 'impolite beliefs'). On a relevance-theoretic analysis, it is the form of the utterance which determines how much effort we have to expend; therefore it is the form which is seen as being more closely linked to the humorous effect. It is my view - and one which I hope will become clear during the discussion below - that the humour in jokes is largely a matter of style; that is, it has less to do with type of content and much more to do with the way that content is communicated.

4.3.4. Irony and banter

It will be remembered that Leech introduces the category of banter to account for those utterances whose meaning is one step removed from the ironical meaning. While Leech sees irony as a

form of "mock-politeness", banter is seen as a form of "mock-impoliteness" (Leech, *ibid*: 144).

As a means of distinguishing between those instances of comic and non-comic irony, this new category was found to be ineffective. Many cases of banter are nonhumorous cliches, as in the following:

(6) No rest for the wicked! (Said to someone who obviously gets little opportunity to relax.)

(7) What a mean cowardly trick! (Said to someone who has performed a particularly clever gambit.)
(Leech, *ibid*: 144)

Moreover, some cases of mock-impoliteness which are comic do not fit Leech's criteria. We will look at these examples again now. Consider (8) and (9) below.

(8) "Sociologists, it is well-known, are humourless left-wing purveyors of nonsense and truisms."

(9) Bernard: If you could get her to listen to reason...
Jim: She's a sociology student, Bernard.

These two examples were said to fall outside the scope of Leech's definition because they are impolite (or "impolite") about a

third party, whereas banter is about saying something which is impolite to the hearer (Leech, *ibid*: 144). In addition, Jim's reply in (9) expresses the impolite thought through implicature, while for Leech banter involves the hearer in saying (rather than merely implying) something which is impolite (Leech, *ibid*: 144)

On a relevance-theoretic approach, (8) and (9) are straightforward examples of irony. We'll look at (9) first.

In this exchange Jim is ironically implying that sociology students are incapable of rational thought; nothing particularly funny about that. Remember, though, that it is only material which can be taken for granted by both speaker and hearer which is left implicit. So, because his opinion is conveyed through implicature, Jim is able to convey the additional information that he believes his views to be shared by Bernard, and indeed, by many other people besides. In other words, we are caused to think of circumstances in which this additional information - which is actually highly contentious - would be seen as mundane and matter-of-fact.

Of course, Jim does not really believe that sociologists are incapable of rational thought, a point which brings me to the second contributory factor to the humour in this example. To appreciate the humour, we have to recognise the echoic nature of Jim's response, that is, we have to entertain the idea that he holds such a view, but at the same time we are not expected to

believe that he - or anyone else, for that matter - could actually be quite so bigoted.

A similar analysis can be applied to the utterance in (8). Again the author of a controversial opinion is not endorsing, but ironically echoing, a contentious view, the only real difference being that in (8) the contentious view is made explicit while in (9) it is left implicit. In both cases, it is the controversiality of the view expressed, together with the implied uncontroversiality, which provides the key to the humour.

I want to make one further point. On a relevance-theoretic analysis, the examples in (8) and (9) could be classed, not just as ironic, but as cases of comic ironic hyperbole. In other words, while Jim may not really believe that sociologists are irrational, he may well hold them in low esteem. As for Barley's utterance in (8), this can easily be seen as an exaggerated version of his actual viewpoint. (The fact that speakers can use hyperbole to express their opinions in this way undermines Raskin's view that jokes are incapable of conveying information that is both true and relevant.)

Leech mentions hyperbole in connection with the Interest Principle, and its counterpart, litotes, in connection with the Pollyanna Principle. We will look now at the issues raised by

these two other principles, and consider how relevance theory might respond.

4.3.5. Relevance theory and the interest and Pollyanna principles

We noted in chapter three that both hyperbole and litotes can be comic, citing (10) as an example of the former and (11) as an example of the latter.

(10) her hair was expensively contrived to look as though she had just been electrocuted.

(11) Of a man said to have broken up all the furniture one says,
"He was a little intoxicated"

Hyperbole and litotes are said to represent a violation of the first maxim of quality, so on a violation approach to humour, both (10) and (11) were described in terms of the violation of the CP rather than the PP. Leech proposes a rationale for our use of hyperbole and litotes. The former, he suggests, is motivated by the interest principle, that is to say, we use it to liven up our conversation, while the latter is motivated by the Pollyanna principle, the principle which encourages us to emphasise the positive aspects of life and downplay the negative side. It was noted that these two principles picked out a large

subsection of humorous data. In the case of the interest principle, there seemed to be a good reason for this. The interest principle requires us to be unpredictable, and hence interesting. Since, on a violation account, unpredictability is seen as providing the key to much verbal humour, we might expect many utterances adhering to that principle to be funny as well. It is not so easy, though, to see why utterances adhering to the Pollyanna principle might be comic. Indeed it is partly because Leech's account seems capable of telling only half the story that I want to consider how relevance theory might tackle the problem.

On a relevance-theoretic approach, the utterances in (10) and (11) would be classed - like (7) and (8) - as ironic. Perhaps it is the case that hyperbole and litotes are comic when they are also ironic. If so, there is a simple reason for this. When we speak ironically, we need to give our addressees some clue so that they recognise the dissociative nature of our utterance. We can do this in a number of ways. We might, for example, adopt an ironic tone of voice, or we may, from our facial expression, indicate that we are dissociating ourselves from the proposition expressed. In addition, we may either exaggerate or understate our case. The utterance in (10) is a case of exaggeration (i.e. comic ironic hyperbole), while (11) is an understatement (i.e. comic ironic litotes). The hearer in (10) knows that the person being referred to did not really look as though she had just been electrocuted; similarly, the hearer in (11) knows that someone who has broken up all the furniture must have been more than just

a little intoxicated. The elements of exaggeration or understatement in these examples act as indicators signifying a degree of dissociation from the proposition expressed; the hearer, in recognising this, recognises also the echoic, and hence comic, nature of the utterances. (See Carter (1987) for further discussion of the ways in which speakers indicate their ironic intentions.)

4.3.6. Unintentional humour

It is possible for someone to find humour where humour is not intended. We had an example of this in our motor car bore from the previous section. One important source of unintentional humour is the unconscious pun. S. herzer (1978) notes that with regard to unconscious punning there are four possibilities:

- 1) the pun is noticed by both speaker and hearer;
- 2) the pun is noticed by the speaker but not the hearer;
- 3) the pun is noticed by the hearer but not the speaker;
- 4) the pun is not noticed by either speaker or hearer.

The first possibility is probably the most conducive to laughter, although the second and third are also capable of producing a humorous effect. S. herzer is not concerned exclusively with the humorous pun. In fact, his main aim is to show how unconscious punning plays a role in discourse cohesion. He is aware, however, of the prevalence of humorous puns involving references to sex, citing the following example of a pun which was

unintentionally produced, but then laughed at by both speaker and listeners:

(12) In a course on human sexuality there's a lot to cover.

According to S herzer, it is the topic of (12) which causes people to look for and to find puns:

"In American white middle class society, when discussing such tabu subjects as sex, individuals interpret words and phrases as allusive puns which would probably not seem at all punful to them if the discussion were about a non-tabu subject Sacks himself notes that it is more natural to talk about such subjects as sex allusively than to talk about them directly. My point is that not only do speakers tend to talk about these topics allusively, but listeners tend to interpret them allusively." (S herzer, *ibid*: 334/345)

S herzer may well be right, but this does not explain why such puns should be seen as comic. It seems to me that when puns are unintentional we laugh at the thought that the speaker could have uttered the pun and been oblivious to the ambiguity. This is similar to the humour derived from intentional punning, the only real difference being that when humour is intended we know that the speaker is only pretending not to be aware of the double entendre; in unintentional punning the speaker is, initially at least, genuinely unaware of the ambiguity.

4.3.7. Non-humorously intended utterances as intentional humour

Sometimes unintentional humour can be reclassified as intentional. This happens when an individual inadvertently causes another individual to be amused, and the second individual then isolates whatever it was that caused him amusement and presents it for the amusement of others. The slips of the tongue made by radio and television commentators are one such example. A selection of them are given below.

(13) Her time, about 4.13, which she's capable of.

(David Coleman)

(14) Even to my untrained eye, it looks as though she has a long train... (Ronald Allison)

(15) I must apologise to the deaf for the loss of subtitles.

(Angela Rippon)

(16) Send in your competition answers with your name, age and how old you are. (Tony Blackburn)

It is easy to make the kind of mistakes cited above, especially on live television. Nor do such utterances present major communication problems. In processing the remarks for optimal relevance, we usually filter out the 'nonsense', and arrive at the speaker's intended meaning. Some people do notice the nonsensicality, however, and are amused by these utterances. In presenting them to a wider audience (all the above have appeared in Private Eye and subsequently in Colemanballs), they want us to

be amused as well. This is the sense in which unintentional humour can become intentional.

There is quite a market for this kind of thing. The now defunct New Statesman used to run a column called 'This England'.

Readers sent in extracts from the press that had struck them as particularly amusing. The following is an example.

(17) Please advise me how I can best protect my stamp collection in the event of a nuclear war, from the hazards of intense heat and high radiation levels. Also, would the resulting radiation affect the phosphor reaction of my Chambon 'dull orange'? (Letter in Stamp Collecting, reprinted in The New Statesman)

The person who spotted this letter would have been surprised, and subsequently amused, that anyone could possibly think along those lines. In the event of a major global catastrophe there is a man (I am assuming it is a man) who is more concerned about his stamp collection than he is about his own safety, and indeed that of the whole of mankind.

Again, the important thing about (17) is that the mechanisms at work are identical to those already discussed. To appreciate the humour in this example we have to abandon some existing assumptions concerning our own priorities and value system and take on those of this stamp collector; unless we do this, we

cannot understand his conception of the world. And the more we think about it, the more weird is this world of his. First the author of (17) is assuming that he will survive a nuclear attack (even when radiation levels are high and the heat intense); second he is assuming that in the event of a war, life will continue much as before. Part of the thrill of stamp collecting has to do with possessing items which are rare and valuable. Yet, in the aftermath of a full-scale nuclear war, it is likely, surely, that a loaf of bread will be more highly valued than a rare stamp. In this context, the vision of a man in his nuclear bunker protecting his stamp collection, together with his back numbers of Stamp Collecting, is a ludicrous one. The person who submitted this letter to the New Statesman could see this, and wanted us to see it as well (note 6).

The two layers of processing which I have repeatedly referred to can be clearly differentiated in examples such as (17). When it appeared in Stamp Collecting this letter would, in normal circumstances, require only the one layer of processing: when reproduced in the New Statesman, the reader is expected to realise that the person who submitted it is dissociating himself from its content. In this case, then, (and to appreciate the humour) the two layers of processing are necessary.

We have looked briefly at two types of unintentional humour. The first, unconscious punning, falls outside the scope of the speech act model. The second crosses the boundary into intentional humour and should, therefore, lend itself to a description in speech-act terms. This type of example has yet to be discussed by speech act theorists.

4.3.8. A relevance-theoretic approach to humour: summary and conclusions

I believe that the examples we have looked at in this, and the previous, section have enabled us to see more clearly exactly how humour is communicated through utterances.

First, I have argued that speech act theorists were misguided in thinking that the humour in jokes had to do with thwarted expectations, and suggested instead that the subsequent reorganisation of existing assumptions was more closely linked to the humorous effect. What this means is that it is not the unconventionality of an utterance which provides the key to the humour; rather it is the extra work that the unconventional utterance requires of us. Relevance theory holds that we do not engage in extra processing work for nothing: we expect some kind of payoff. Where jokes are concerned, that extra effort is rewarded when we appreciate the joke's humorous import.

Of course it is not enough to say that the answer to humour lies in the extra processing: we have to explain the connection between the two. I have illustrated above how in non-humorously intended utterances speakers leave implicit material that can be taken for granted (in order to save hearers from unnecessary processing) but that in humorously intended utterances it is the less easily accessible assumptions which are left implicit (note 7).

This clearly involves hearers in extra effort, but it still does not explain why such utterances should be humorous. What I have tried to show is that leaving implicit assumptions that cannot necessarily be taken for granted in itself leads to further implications being drawn. For example, if contentious material is expressed through implicature, we will be caused to entertain the idea that it is not contentious, simply because it is the uncontentious material which usually is conveyed through implicature. We have seen that this technique is used extensively in humorously intended utterances.

This is not the only way that speakers can use implicatures to convey the idea that contentious material is not contentious. They can do so by ironically echoing the contentious view. When this happens, the controversial view can be made explicit, but the speaker must indicate in some way that he is dissociating himself from the view expressed. In both types of case, the speaker wants us to entertain the idea that controversial

material is not controversial, but at the same time we are expected to see that, in actual fact, it is controversial. In other words, we are caused to entertain an absurd opinion, and then we are expected to see just how absurd that opinion is.

This last point brings us on to another important aspect of humour in utterances. I have mentioned above how it is necessary that we arrive at the humorous point by virtue of our own (processing) efforts, and we looked at several examples where the joke would fail if everything had to be spelled out in laborious detail. What has not, perhaps, been explained is why exactly it is so important that the listener finds the humour in the joke for herself.

Some psychologists see joke processing as essentially a problem-solving exercise: it is the successful solution of the problem which gives rise to feelings of heightened self-esteem, which is then manifested in laughter or smiling (Schultz, 1976: 16). Moreover, empirical studies have shown that the pleasure obtained from finding the joke solution increases in accordance with the difficulty of the problem solved (McGhee, 1973), while jokes which are too obvious fail to amuse (La Fave et al., 1976).

I think that there is another reason why the humour in jokes has to be 'discovered' by the listener. It has to do with the relationship between the person telling the joke and her listener. We have already seen that speakers who know each other

well will typically rely more on the use of implicature than speakers who are strangers to one another. Moreover, when the implicit material concerns the expression of attitude, we can assume an even greater degree of intimacy. Now, to tell someone a joke necessarily entails the expression of attitude, since it implies, at the very least, something like the following:

"I find this comic and I want you to find it comic as well."

Many jokes will go further than this, conveying additional information about the speaker's attitudes to a specific topic, which the hearer is expected to share. Thus, the very act of telling a joke implies some intimacy or rapport. If a speaker were to spell everything out, leaving nothing to the hearer to work out for herself, she would destroy that intimacy, and thereby destroy the joke.

* * * * *

I have emphasised that the way the content of a joke is communicated is crucial. This point is vaguely appreciated, but I believe that its significance is hugely underestimated. Nash, for instance, acknowledges the importance of language to humour creation, but at the same time he adheres to the established view that the topic being referred to constitutes a vital part of the joke as well. Lodge endorses Nash's viewpoint. In a recent newspaper article, he identifies the two primary sources of

comedy in fiction as being situation and style (Lodge, 1991). Bergson's thinking was rather different: he believed also in the two sources of humour, referring to one as the comic in words (i.e. the humour created by language) and the other as the comic in situations (i.e. the humour expressed by language - Bergson's emphasis). However, while Nash and Lodge see style and situation as being inextricably linked, Bergson believed that humour expressed verbally derived from either the one or the other.

It is my view that although verbal jokes can be discussed and analysed from the point of view either of their form or their content, when it comes to locating their humour, it is the style of the utterance (that is, the form) which invariably takes precedence over the content. Throughout these final two sections I have stressed the importance of style to the humorous effect obtained, showing how - in the elephant jokes, for example - a minor change to the wording can effectively kill the humour. I have also demonstrated how humour can be destroyed if the joke's implicit material is spelled out in tedious detail. As for a joke's content, I have shown how there is nothing intrinsically comic about any particular event or series of events. This became especially clear in the exchanges between a shop assistant and a customer, where the shop assistant's responses can be interpreted either echoically (that is, as examples of caricature), or non-echoically (that is, as insults). The same echoic/non-echoic dichotomy was seen in the seriously intended

letter in Stamp Collecting and its humorously intended reproduction in the New Statesman.

Should we conclude, then, that verbal humour is essentially no more and no less than a stylistic effect? No. The examples just cited which illustrate how tangential is a joke's content can equally be used to demonstrate that style is not the deciding factor either. After all, the stamp collector's letter was reproduced word for word in the New Statesman: thus, with no change whatever to the style, a serious enquiry was transformed into a joke.

I think the source of the humour lies not so much in style per se, but in the cognitive activity that the precise style of the utterance gives rise to. One final example will illustrate what I mean. Remember that at the end of my introductory chapter I stated that the central aim of this thesis was to explain the difference between the humorous utterance in (18) and its non-humorous counterpart in (19).

(18) Two taxis collided and 30 Scotsmen were taken to hospital.

(19) Scotsmen are very mean. They travel in enormously overcrowded taxis to avoid paying the full fare. Once two taxis containing 30 Scotsmen collided. The passengers were taken to hospital.

(18) and (19) describe an identical series of events: it is the style which differentiates them. We will see how this difference in form triggers different cognitive responses.

1) Massive reorganisation of the context - first layer of interpretation:

In processing (18), the hearer abandons any assumptions she might have about the number of people who, at any one time, would normally travel in a taxi. She would then have to make some fresh assumptions, namely:

- Scotsmen are very mean;
- They travel in overcrowded taxis to save money;
- On the occasion in question, two taxis contained, between them, as many as 30 Scotsmen;
- It is possible for two taxis to hold so many people;
- The taxi drivers in question did not object to squeezing so many people into their vehicles.

This massive reorganisation of the context does not, of course, occur in the processing of (19).

2) Recovery of the interpretive nature of the utterance - second layer of interpretation:

The idea that Scotsmen are very mean is highly contentious.

Nonetheless, in interpreting (18), the hearer is expected to entertain the idea that it is not controversial, and then to recognise that the speaker is not endorsing the view that

Scotsmen are mean, but ironically echoing a well-known national stereotype.

In interpreting (19), the idea that Scotsmen are mean would, in normal circumstances, be taken at face value.

3) Hearer has to arrive at humorous import by virtue of her own efforts:

In (18) the hearer is trusted to be able to recover the implied material, which is a measure of the relationship between speaker and hearer (note 8).

There is no indication in (19) of there being any rapport between speaker and hearer.

Lastly, it is important to appreciate that the cognitive processes which are involved in the interpretation of (18) and (19) are directly related to the use, in those utterances, of implicit and explicit material. This should not surprise us, as Sperber and Wilson have pointed out that style is largely determined by decisions as to what should be made explicit and what should be left implicit (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 218).

* * * * *

I have isolated style as being crucial to the creation of verbal humour, and, more important, I have identified precisely the kind of cognitive activity that the humorous utterance gives rise to. One final question remains to be answered: are these mechanisms

unique to verbal humour? The answer, I think, is that they are not (note 9). Every characteristic of the humorous utterance seems to occur in other, non-humorously intended utterances. Reorganisation, for instance, is required frequently in the interpretation of advertising slogans, as we saw in a previous chapter. The recovery of a range of weakly implicated material, another feature of verbal humour, has been shown by Sperber and Wilson (1986: 222) to be a defining feature, also, of the poetic effect. As for the two layers of processing, it has already been pointed out that the fact that a hearer has gone beyond the initial processing stage and focussed on the significance of some piece of information being conveyed to him, is no guarantee that humour will result. Finally, interpretive language use, although a defining feature of intentional verbal humour, is widespread - again, as we have seen - in many other types of utterance.

Having said that, I do think that there is something unique about the combination of stylistic devices employed in intentional verbal humour. I will compare the ambiguity in jokes with the ambiguity in advertising slogans. Consider the following:

(20) "Spain - everything under the sun"

This slogan was used by the Spanish Tourist Office to promote holidays in Spain. On an initial reading it is likely that the phrase "everything under the sun" will be interpreted as an

idiom, and only subsequently will it be interpreted as a claim that everywhere in Spain enjoys gloriously sunny weather.

Reorganisation is clearly involved - and along similar lines to that which is found in the waiter-diner jokes, for example - but whereas the waiter-diner jokes depend for their effect on the range of weak implicatures that the reorganisation gives rise to, the advertising slogan aims to get across one single message:

- If you go to Spain for your holidays, you will enjoy gloriously sunny weather.

The slogan works by causing the reader initial processing difficulties (and can thus be compared with the Habitat and book club advertisements discussed above). Once these are resolved, the intention is that the advertiser's message (that is, the second reading) will be clearly imprinted on the reader's mind (note 10).

This sharp focussing of ideas seems to be absent from verbal jokes. Indeed the difference between the ambiguity in advertising slogans and the ambiguity in jokes could be summed up by saying that in the former it is used primarily as an attention-grabbing device, while in the latter it is used to convey a range of indeterminate, and sometimes quite diffuse, meanings.

Another stylistic effect which can be compared to humour is poetry. Sperber and Wilson have defined a poetic effect as "the peculiar effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 222). One of their examples will illustrate what they mean. Compare (21) with (22).

(21) My childhood days are gone.

(22) My childhood days are gone, gone.

In both (21) and (22) the speaker is indicating that her childhood is over. The utterance in (22), however, conveys more than just the information that the speaker's childhood has gone; it also conveys the speaker's attitude to the proposition expressed. It is the hearer's task to recover something of the speaker's mood, which is, after all, only weakly communicated. He may infer, for example, that the speaker is saddened by the realisation that her childhood is over, that she feels nostalgic for the past, or remorse. Clearly the speaker is trusting the hearer to be able to imagine what she is thinking - to expand the context to include some of the things that might be running through the speaker's mind.

We have looked at numerous examples of verbal humour which likewise require us to be able to access a wide array of weakly implicated material. Indeed, in this respect, humour and poetry

could be said to have a great deal in common. A major difference, though, lies in the absence, in poetry, of the massive reorganisation which is invariably required in the processing of humorous utterances. (If reorganisation is required in the processing of poetic effects, I would argue that it is of a much less radical kind than that which is required in the processing of verbal jokes.)

What I am saying, then, is that the mechanisms which are employed in the creation of verbal jokes are employed in the creation of a number of other stylistic effects. So, although there does not seem to be a pragmatic device which is unique to humour, the devices which are employed do seem to be combined in a unique way. Humour has stylistic links with both poetry and the double entendres of advertising slogans, but neither of these makes use of the same combination of devices which we have identified as being characteristic of the humorous utterance. It is in this somewhat weaker sense, then, that I would want to argue that verbal humour is unique.

NOTES

Chapter One

- 1 Not all writers on humour would agree that humour theories can be subsumed under just three main headings. Robinson (1991) identifies five, and Keith-Spiegel (1972) eight, different theories. I am merely attempting to give a flavour of the ways people have thought about humour in the past, and have therefore used the simplest classification system.
- 2 The news of Warhol's death was no longer hot by the time this headline appeared, the ensuing article being an appreciation rather than a news story. If readers had not already known that Warhol was dead, and if the headline had appeared on the front page of the newspaper, and not as a review article, it is possible, indeed quite likely, that the wrong inferences would have been drawn, and the utterance misinterpreted. This is also important, since it demonstrates the extreme context-sensitivity of successful communication.

3 It should be mentioned that Searle makes a distinction between 'serious' and 'parasitic' utterances (Searle, 1969: 57).

Parasitic forms of communication fall outside 'normal real world talk' (Searle, *ibid*: 78), and include play acting, joke telling, teaching a language, reciting poems and practising pronunciation. Because he makes this distinction, Searle might want to argue that it is inappropriate to apply speech act theory to verbal humour. There are two answers to this (hypothetical) objection.

- 1) Linguists working within the Searle-Grice framework have attempted such an analysis, and it is their work that is evaluated. Indeed the notion that humour stems from some form of violation of the norms of conversation is now well established in the literature.
- 2) The distinction between 'serious' and 'parasitic' utterances is difficult to sustain. It demands that we distinguish between the spontaneous, witty remark, which would be classified as serious, and the formal telling of a joke, which would be considered parasitic. Furthermore, it implies that the stand-up comic is not communicating, in any real sense, with his audience - unless, perhaps, when he is adlibbing.

- 4 While there may be speech act theorists who aim to give an account of unintentional meaning, Searle deals solely with intended interpretation (see, for example, Searle, 1969, Chapter 2.6; Searle, 1983, Chapter 6).
- 5 It should be emphasised that I am not committing myself to the view that the utterances in (10) and (11) are invariably humorous and non-humorous respectively. As I have already pointed out, it is possible to take any 'humorous' utterance and construct a context in which that utterance would not be comic.

Chapter Two

- 1 Navon adopts a similar position when he says:

"The teller (i.e. of a joke) must be lying or telling about an event in an imaginary world. Either way, the teller is aware of the same knowledge as the listener is, and the protagonists seem to obey the laws of the hypothetical world in which they reside. If they do not, that can be a good subject for joking..." (Navon, 1988: 214)

- 2 There is a question, though, as to how the narrator's behaviour can be seen as conforming to the maxims. Raskin's answer to this is that when speakers are in joke-telling mode they abide by a set of maxims which are quite different from the ones which apply when speakers are engaged in bona-fide discourse. Yamaguchi rejects this view, arguing that "we do not need another cooperative principle for joke-telling" (Yamaguchi, *ibid*: 324), and yet he fails to explain exactly how the narrator's contribution can be construed as true, informative, relevant, and so on.

Chapter Three

- 1 This solution may be objected to on the grounds that a new problem is created, namely that a theoretical account is needed of how the appropriate point is determined. How do speakers know, in other words, the extent to which they should apply these politeness maxims? The answer, I think, is that as members of a speech community we just do know what the social and cultural norms are, and are able to determine, with a fair degree of accuracy, how much approbation, modesty or sympathy, and so on, is appropriate in a given context. Moreover, it is because these politeness maxims are culture-specific that non-native speakers are likely to make judgements that do not match native speaker intuitions.

Chapter Four

1 Raskin has actually gone further than this, committing himself to the view that the purpose of a joke is to create an effect and not to convey information:

"The purpose of joke telling is not to convey any information ... but rather to create a special effect, with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh."

(Raskin, op.cit: 101)

Zhao (1988) has shown, however, that jokes are capable of creating an effect and conveying information. An example from Nash (op.cit) will illustrate.

Consider the following:

- Living in Coventry is like watching a plank warp.

Someone who is unfamiliar with the Midlands, and who has no preconceived ideas about life in Coventry, will be able to infer from this humorously intended piece of graffiti that Coventry is an unexciting place to live. Of course, living in Coventry cannot be quite so boring as watching a plank warp, but nonetheless, the hearer gets the gist of the message, along with its humorous import, which will give him a flavour, perhaps, of life in a fairly nondescript Midlands city.

2 In his paper on the nature of punchlines, Oring (1989) also identifies cognitive reorganisation as a feature of humour appreciation. Tannen (1987) talks about a "frame shift", while Morreall (1983) argues that laughter results from a "pleasant psychological shift".

3 Hockett argues that these do it car stickers are actually double entendres, not puns. He explains the difference as follows:

"In the exact pun, two distinct words or phrases happen to be phonemically identical, whereas in the double entendre a single word or phrase has two relevant ranges of meaning, both brought to the hearer's attention by context. This distinction may not always be easy to make, and may be spurious." (Hockett, 1977: 250)

4 Raskin (op.cit: 150) also discusses these do it car stickers, since they fit neatly into his view that humour stems from the overlapping of two opposing scripts. It is important to appreciate the difference between Raskin's position and that of the relevance-theoretic position outlined here. For Raskin it is merely the juxtaposition of the two opposing ideas that creates the humour. According to relevance theory, the humour stems from the sudden insight we get into two contrasting mental worlds.

5 In contrast, Freud (1976) believed that obscene jokes (his

term) are found in abundance because they give us a much-needed release from our inhibitions. He further believed that to indulge in sexual humour represented a saving in psychic energy since it takes effort to suppress 'forbidden' - that is, sexual - thoughts.

- 6 An analogy can be drawn here between these examples and the work of artists such as Marcel Duchamp. By isolating the urinal from its usual context, Duchamp caused the spectator to see it in a different light: he transformed it into an art object. These gratuitous utterances can likewise be transformed into jokes.
- 7 Other humour researchers - for example, Freud (1976), Koestler (1964), Dolitsky (1983), Hetzron (1991) - have mentioned the contribution of implicitly conveyed information to the creation of verbal humour. However, none of these give a precise enough description of the kind of information that is typically left implicit, nor do they attempt to explain exactly why this mode of communication might be comic.
- 8 Oring is an incongruity theorist who has noted the importance of effort and discovery to humour appreciation (Oring, 1989):
"... 'getting a joke' involves more than being presented with an appropriate incongruity. It requires effort. An appropriate incongruity must, to some extent, be discovered." (Oring, 1989: 358, author's emphasis)

9 Many writers on humour - for example, McGhee (1972), Morreall (1983), Navon (1988), Goldstein (1990), Hetzron (1991) - have considered whether there is a common thread to humour - something that could be called its 'essence'. The consensus nowadays is that it is too diverse a phenomenon to be reduced to a single, unifying formula.

10 Giora (1991), who has also considered the difference between jokes and advertising slogans, disagrees with this analysis. She believes that the ambiguity in jokes is resolved (i.e. cancelled and replaced), while in commercial texts the two interpretations are retained. One of her own examples will illustrate. Consider the following:

- "Don't leave without a good buy" (sign on an airport store, cited by Giora (ibid: 477))

According to Giora, the above slogan is a witty text (but not a joke) because the ambiguity remains unresolved: both interpretations ("don't leave without saying good-bye"/"don't leave without buying something") are seen as relevant and are thus retained. While this may be true, to some extent, of her example, it does not hold good for the slogans discussed above - the Habitat slogan, for instance - in which it is vital that the initial interpretation is abandoned. Moreover, we have looked at many examples of humorous texts which depend for their effect on the ambiguity not being

resolved. There is clearly a danger in drawing conclusions from a highly restrictive sample of data.

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